the Winter Witch

by writing_as_tracey

Summary

Hermione realized it began with a sense of Impending Doom and finished with a battle outside her tent. Now, she has to decide between staying and helping Robb Stark and the Northern army or returning to her universe. And that line is getting harder to see the longer she's in Westeros.

Part One: Chapters 1-19
Part Two: Chapters 20-31
Part Three: October 2019

Notes
Going to mix the television show and the books up; I've only seen up to early season 2 and stopped reading Storm of Swords because of all the Catelyn POVs. Similar beginning to SciFi Chick's *Merlin series*, which is amazing, everyone go read it. Any mistakes are totally mine. Whoops!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Hermione realized it began with a sense of Impending Doom.

Her danger sense wasn't as finely tuned as Harry's, of course, but they didn't survive years at Hogwarts, and then a year on the run on just Harry and his incredible luck. Hermione's knowledge certainly helped, and of course, after a while, Harry's sense of 'something wrong' rubbed off on her. It hadn't always – she still felt the stinging shame of her sixth year to this day – but she learned from it and did her best to adapt.

Which was why she felt Impending Doom settle on her shoulders the further she walked in the forest.

It was the end of summer in 1999, she was nineteen, turning twenty, and put off a job working for Kingsley Shacklebolt at the Ministry of Magic for a gap year to help Professor McGonagall and the other Hogwarts professors rebuild Hogwarts. Hermione, not always magically powerful but magically intelligent, oversaw documenting what needed repairs and maintaining the inventory before moving on to the library and working with the books, repairing and copying them. (And if she copied them for her personal collection, well… Harry and Ron's less than pristine morals had rubbed off on her over the years, too.)

But she didn't quite understand Professor McGonagall's latest order, of venturing into the Forbidden Forest in search of the remnants of the Centaurs, to treat with them. Firenze was unable to, due to his
exile, but a witch from Hogwarts was a better choice? Hermione didn't argue, but she was disgruntled. The last time she had been in the forest was during the final battle – and before that, in her fifth year leading Umbridge towards Grawp and the Centaurs (that wasn't her brightest move, she'd admit, but she did get vindictive pleasure out of the terror in Umbridge's face), and before that, helping Sirius escape and nearly having her soul sucked out by Dementors. She didn't have fond memories of that forest.

Yet, here she was.

That Impending Doom she felt earlier? Well, it was strong enough that after she met with McGonagall, Hermione marched straight back to the Gryffindor dormitory, packed hardy clothing for an overnight trip, and re-established the spells on her beaded purse. Impending Doom was telling her being prepared – like how they had been during the war – would be a good idea. Hermione decided to listen.

That had been three days previously and she was still in the forest.

"Honestly, you'd think I'd have come out at the other end already," she muttered angrily under her breath, her wand flat in the palm of her hand, spinning wildly. "Point Me Hogwarts!"

The trees were unrecognizable: their trunks were too large and thick, the leaves the wrong shape to anything she knew, and the lack of magical beasts to snack on her – werewolves, or acronumantula, or centaurs – was worrisome. Where was she?

"This is useless," she continued to mutter. The air was growing colder as the sun set, streaking through the thick canopy of leaves above her. The forest itself was quiet, with birds beginning to wind down their chirps and songs for their nests; other noises, the rustles of leaves and branches, began to grow louder instead.

With a deep sigh, Hermione squared her shoulders and dropped her beaded bag on the hard ground in front of her. She knelt, opening the flap to the bag and then stuck her arm in. Had anyone been around to see her, they would have been astonished to witness Hermione's entire arm disappear into the bag as she knelt over, her head tilted to the side as she pushed through, searching for something elusive.

The young woman's brown eyes lit with joy as she finally found what she was looking for. She gave a hard yank, and fell backwards with momentum. In her hand was a small, flat green square of shiny material.

Hermione began to hum to herself. She stood, walked to a relatively clear area of the forest, and then place the tiny square the middle of the clearing. Several paces away, she stood straight and brandished her wand, prepared like a conductor was.

"And now," she murmured to herself, swishing the wand.

The small green tent grew from the small, green square by doubling, then tripling, and further, in size and sprung up, stretching and twisting until it resembled a relatively small, triangular camping tent. Spokes and lines stretched the held the tent upright and firm.

With a smile, Hermione nonverbally erected familiar wards and charms: notice-me-not, muggle repellent, proximity alerts. Several were variations of what she used during the war, and others were much more basic.

"Time to figure out where I am," she concluded, unzipping the tent flap and stepping inside.
Contrary to the exterior, the interior was magically expanded into a comfortable two-bedrooms and shared living and kitchen space, with a sink. The bathroom was also fully functional and shared between the two bedrooms. In the living space, a freestanding fireplace made of cast iron lit, basking the living area in a warm glow and comfortable heat.

Hermione settled in, curling up in an armchair with one of the many copied tomes from the Hogwarts library in her lap; a cup of tea rested on the small side table.

"Now," she began quietly, "Let's see if I can figure out where I am."

At first, she thought it was a matter of where. A couple astronomy and geography books, and a night outside with a portable, collapsible telescope told Hermione that it wasn't a matter of where, as none of the stars lined up with her charts and her known reference points. The young witch retreated into her tent and began to theorize anew.

The next day, after a sleepless night scribbling over several feet of parchment, Hermione decided it was a matter of when. She was in the past, and of course, stars would change between the now – the past – and then, her future. Stars going out, galaxies spreading further over the millennia – it made sense.

Except, it didn't, as the second night attempting to pinpoint the stars demonstrated that there was no Little or Big Dipper, no Southern Cross from the first night, but also there were no other distinct planetary or sun reference points for Hermione to situate herself in. As far as she could tell, she wasn't even in the Milky Way! She wasn't on a planet orbiting a different star, like Polaris or Cygnus. She was literally on another world in another galaxy.

But that didn't make sense, she thought. One second, I'm in the Forbidden Forest, and the next I'm on another planet? How does that even work?

Books on astronomy and geography and time travel were put back in her beaded bag or on the shelves of the few bookshelves that stood on either side of the freestanding fireplace, beginning to clutter amongst the other books Hermione had begun to hoard there.

"So, now what?" she asked out loud with a loud huff and flew herself backwards in the armchair. There was no way to document or theorize her way out of this one, if she truly was on another planet.

"Okay, think Hermione," she muttered, standing up and beginning to pace. "It can't be a different planet. That makes no sense – you don't travel thousands upon millions of miles like that. It wasn't a wormhole or FTL because you didn't have a space ship and there wasn't any indication that you even stepped through a tear. So, what's left?"

Hermione paced to the bookshelves, then across to her armchair and beyond into the kitchen. It was twenty-three steps from either end of the tent to the other, and she made the trip five times before crouching on the floor and letting loose a loud scream of frustration.

"I didn't travel millions of miles," she muttered resolutely. "That's not physically possible. I didn't Apparate, I didn't touch an illegal PortKey, and I didn't enter a wormhole to another galaxy or a Stargate." She felt her lips twist into a wry smile.

Standing, she turned to gaze into the fireplace and said, firmly, 'Occam's Razor: 'Entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily.' If I follow the logic, this is what I get when I remove variables: I didn't time travel and I didn't travel through space. What is left? I travelled into another dimension.
Therefore, I am in another dimension and need to find my way home."

With a firm nod, Hermione settled back in her arm chair and reached for her earlier abandoned
parchment and quill. She had a long night ahead of her with Arithmancy calculations.

Or, she would have, if it wasn't for the loud shouts that drew her attention from her calculations
hours later.

The Battle of the Whispering Wood was messy, loud, and gory.

It was no different to any other battle Robb had led, and he was certainly gaining much experience
alongside his uncle, the Blackfish. He had successfully routed the Lannister army earlier in smaller
skirmishes (but no less diminished by importance) and this one was proving to be quite fruitful –
even if it meant the possibility of serious injury, given the ragged and menacing presence the
Kingslayer sported as he slashed his way through the battlefield towards him.

Grey Wind was busy lunging at Lannister soldiers, attempting to halt their movements as much as
possible while Robb was engaged with others. His guard, Daryn Hornwood, Eddard Karstark and
Torrhen Karstark, formed a loose circle around him, and it was Daryn who met the Kingslayer's first
slash.

It was hard to move in the Valley, and many times Robb stumbled over a loose rock or root as he
tried to gain sure footing. Of course, for every rock he stumbled over, so did his opponents. None
were fully comfortable in the dense forest, but the cleared area they slowly maneuvered into was the
best to meet the Lannister soldiers.

Daryn let out a loud shout as he planted his left foot and dug the heel in to stabilize himself, swinging
his sword forward towards the Kingslayer, who ducked and weaved out of the way. Immediately,
Eddard Karstark was there, as was his brother Torrhen, who in a synchronized move both slashed
high and low at the golden-haired knight.

"STARK!" the Kingslayer shouted, bodily pushing Torrhen to the ground and forcing his sword
forward in a violent stabbing motion, catching Torrhen high in the right shoulder. The man screamed
and pulled back, yanking the sword out through his stumbled backtracking.

Robb raised his sword, ready to engage in battle with the famed knight. The golden-haired man
snarled and shifted his weight, planting himself just as Robb did opposite him, waiting for the other
to move first.

"WHAT IN MERLIN'S NAME IS GOING ON HERE?"

Although the battle around them waged, Robb, in surprise, along with the Kingslayer, Daryn,
Torrhen, and Eddard, turned to the loud, angry, feminine shout.

Before, in what Robb would have sworn was an empty clearing around them, was a green tent in a
design he had never seen. But what caught his attention was the young woman who stood outside
the tent, uncaring of the dirty, bloodied men around her. He blinked, wondering if he was
hallucinating, but – no, she didn't disappear.

"I said," she began again, eyes darting from each frozen man to the next, "What is going on here?"

What struck Robb the most was her appearance. She wore strangely patterned trousers cut off at the
ankle in a soft pink, and a matching button-up shirt. She was barefoot. She was slim, but not
unhealthily so, and of average height. However, her hair was a riotous mess of brown corkscrew
curls, and her eyes flashed a strange amber in the twilight.

But most bizarrely, was the steaming goblet in her left hand, and the dark wooden stick in her right.

It was the Kingslayer who moved first, moving away from the woman and turning back to Daryn and Eddard, bringing his sword down diagonally in a long slash, but both men jumped back to avoid the swing. The Kingslayer fluidly continued the movement to a sweep that came from below and up with a deft twist of his wrist. Daryn met the upward swing and parried it with his own forceful down stroke.

"Excuse me," the woman huffed, and Robb saw her stamp a single foot in frustration as everyone around ignored her.

The Kingslayer wordlessly roared and pushed against Daryn's sword, forcing the man back as he pushed himself forward, closer to Robb. Torrhen boldly stood to Robb's right, ready to engage in the fight again, despite the blood pouring from his shoulder.

The Kingslayer finally pushed hard enough to knock Daryn back and Eddard took his place, but the Lannister was enraged and eager to meet Robb and wet his sword with the young Stark's blood. His sword slash and flashed against Eddard's chest plate and high, catching the fleshy, thin skin of his neck. Shocked, Eddard dropped his sword and brought his hand up to his neck, gurgling as blood began to erupt out of the long cut.

Torrhen screamed in rage, and darted forward, his sword held high and ready to bring it down on the Kingslayer's head – but he was stopped.

A flash of blue light hit Torrhen in the chest, and then another hit the Kingslayer. Both were frozen, their eyes wide and immobile as statues.

"That's a bit better," the woman said, and Robb swung his head around to face her. Her eyes were shrewd as they took in the four men, but they lingered on Eddard, who was lying on his back on the damp, churned grass and mud, gasping for breath as blood seeped between his fingers.

Although not frozen in the same way the Kingslayer or Torrhen were, Robb was unable to move as he watched the young woman fearlessly move between the two frozen men until she knelt next to Eddard.

"Right then," she muttered, eyes darting from the blood bubbling from Eddard's throat to the fleshy skin. The right hand, holding the strange stick, was held aloft and pointed at Eddard's neck but she woman realized she needed another hand, and with a huff, Robb watched in awe – and perhaps in horror and fascination, too – as the steaming, strange goblet the woman held in her left hand remained stationary in the air once her fingers left the handle.

"Consarcino," murmured the young woman, pointing the tip of her stick at Eddard's neck, just as she gently moved his hand away from holding the flapping skin together. Under the tip, moving from one end of the cut to the other, the skin began to knit back together. Eddard's laboured breathing and gasping breaths slowed, just as the blood pouring from the wound did.

Unwittingly, Robb took a step forward for a better look in surprise. How did she do that? Magic? Was she a witch?

"Tergeo," she said next, and the blood and dirt and muck on Eddard's face siphoned off slowly, sucking towards the stick's tip and gathering there in a big, blobby ball. With a deft flick of the stick away from Eddard and Robb, the glob shot off like a discarded insect flicked away, landing on the
ground with a splat. The young woman's brown eyes raked over Eddard's face, critically, and she nodded. "You've lost a lot of blood. And you probably need a pick-me-up."

She pointed the tip of her stick over her shoulder and moments later, Robb's mouth dropped open. Two bottles – one with a ruby red liquid and the other orange – came floating out of the tent's flap and came to a rest, hovering at eye sight next to the young woman.

"Blood replenishing," she said, uncorking it. "It'll replace the blood you lost."

She eased her hand behind Eddard's head, supporting his neck, and raised him slightly with a silent urge to drink.

Eddard flashed a horrified look at Robb, who stepped the last few feet closer to the two. He nodded slowly and with confirmation from his liege, Eddard carefully opened his mouth enough to sip.

The woman sighed. "Best just chuck it down in one go. It doesn't taste that good."

Eddard did as told, grimacing at the coppery taste, and then did the same with the orange one ("It's Pepperup," the woman said as though that it explained everything). Steam blew out of his ears and with a shocked breath, out of his mouth and nostrils.

Robb leapt back, immediately falling into a battle stance.

Even Eddard looked shocked, going cross-eyed as he tried to stare down his nose towards his mouth. However, he soon raised a shaky, leather-clad hand to his neck, massaging the skin with wide eyes.

"My lady…?" he trailed off, eyes roving up to the young woman's face. "My… my wound?"

"Healed," she sniffed, tilting her face up with a twitch of her nose.

"That should have killed him," interjected Robb, moving closer again, peering at Eddard's neck, where his hand was still gingerly touching the previously flapping skin. It was now shiny and pink, free of the mud, blood and sweat that covered many of Robb's men.

The young woman turned to him, and Robb sucked in a breath. Her eyes… her gaze was strong and focused entirely on him, and Robb felt something in his stomach shift. Her eyes were a strange, glowing amber in the twilight, framing a heart-shaped face with a dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her cheeks were flushed from her earlier annoyance, and her mouth was flattened in a tight, annoyed pink line.

Robb's cheeks flushed and his eyes darted away from the young woman to the still frozen Torrhen and Kingslayer. Their eyes were moving, terror and annoyance warring behind their immobile forms.

"Ah, my lady?" asked Robb, turning slightly back to the young woman. "My man and enemy?"

"Hmm? Oh." Her face took a distinctly unhappy look as her brows pinched. "Them." She glanced back at Robb, put her hands on her hips and then demanded, "Will you lot be quiet now? I have very important work that I'm trying to do, here."

"Here?" asked Robb, glancing around the cleared land.

"In my tent."

He looked at the flimsy green structure in askance.

She caught his look and sighed. "Look, I'm just trying to do some equations, but you're all so loud."

"I'm sorry," Robb replied, his voice barely above a whisper. "I had no idea you were doing anything of the sort."

The young woman turned and walked back to the tent, leaving Robb to ponder what she had just said.
Besides," she glared at Robb, "You shouldn't be fighting."

"Shouldn't be fighting?!" Robb sputtered, echoing her. "My lady, do you know who this man is?"

She turned and deliberately looked the Kingslayer from head to toe, then turned back to him and shook her head. "No. Should I?"

Robb felt the familiar rage swell in the pit of his stomach, warming him as it bubbled up through his neck. His cheeks flushed – this time, he was sure it was anger and not that strange other emotion when her eyes lit on his – and his breaths quickened. "He attacked my father, killed all his guards. He is guilty of incest and spawning children with his sister – a child, I might add, who wrongly sits on the Iron throne, claiming to be King of Westeros. This same king," he spat the word, "Had my father beheaded, claiming him to be the traitor to the kingdom."

The woman slowly nodded. "Well. That's quite the list of accusations."

She waved the stick absently in the Kingslayer's direction, and immediately, he stumbled forward with the swing of his sword as his body was once more his to control. He quickly regained his footing and turned blazing eyes on the woman. Robb stepped forward, just as Eddard struggled to stand.

"And what do you have to say for yourself?" she asked him, eyes wary as the Lannister met her gaze.

"I deny nothing," he spat, blue eyes flashing.

She was silent for a long moment, watching the man as he held himself tall and powerful, taking pride in the accusations levied against him.

"No," she finally murmured. "I don't suppose you do."

She then sighed, closing her eyes. The sound of the battle around them was fading into moans of pain and cheers of victory – for which side, Robb was unsure, but the battle was coming to an end. A howl pierced the woods and he felt Grey Wind nearby, making his way towards him.

"I am so very tired of battles," the young woman whispered, but her voice carried and was heard by all in the clearing. When she opened her eyes, there was a steely hardness to them. "Play your games, then. Keep me out of it and keep it quiet. I have better things to do."

With that said, she stepped forward and began walking towards her tent, all the while unafraid of the armoured soldiers around her. As she passed between the Kingslayer and Torrhen, the other man unfroze and staggered forward but caught himself, eyes wide, watching the young woman.

The Kingslayer, however, did not wait, and launched himself forward with his sword high at her unprotected back.

"My lady-!" shouted Robb, both he and Eddard darting forward just as Grey Wind burst through the trees. However, Torrhen managed to raise his sword to block the Kingslayer's downward swing. Sparks flew between the two blades as the steel sang, and as they separated, Torrhen made to parry with a side swing of his own – only, the young woman had turned back around, stick pointed at the Kingslayer.

"Stupefy," she muttered, and the Lannister collapsed to the ground like a puppet whose strings were cut, a tense expression still on his face.
Silence fell amongst the four standing.

"Is he dead?" asked Torrhen finally, edging forward and nudging the Kingslayer's boot with his toe.

"No," the woman answered, eyes on the man. "Just unconscious. He'll be like that for quite a few hours unless I revive him."

"What… who are you?" asked Robb lowly, reaching a comforting hand out to Grey Wind, whose head comfortably came to his chest. Although his muzzle was coated with blood and bits of flesh, Robb welcomed the companionable nudge.

The young woman turned her gaze back on him, a small smile on her lips. "Someone very far from home," she replied with a tiny sigh. "I'm Hermione Granger, how do you do?"

"Lady Hermione," began Robb, "You saved one of my men from death and stopped the Kingslayer without shedding blood. Just… just what are you?"

She turned her back on him, moving back towards her tent but threw over her shoulder with a friendly, if not slightly vicious grin, "A friend. Best of luck out there." And then she was gone, back through the flaps.

Not even moments later, Dacey burst through the treeline gasping out the results of a resounding victory, even more so now with the Kingslayer unconscious. Yet, between the glances shared between Torrhen, Eddard and Robb, they couldn't help but notice that Dacey didn't notice or look in the direction of the green tent, even once.

TBC
I:II

The Winter Witch II

Robb sighed. It was hours later, the debriefing between his generals was finally over. The Kingslayer was in a cage on the muddy ground in Riverrun, Grey Wind guarding him through terror and bared teeth; there were nominal losses from the Northern army - and many of his guard survived.

Robb grimaced. Well, he thought, it could've been worse. Torrhen and Eddard could've died if not for Lady Hermione.

Which was another mystery - just who was she, and where had she come from? That tent appeared out of thin air, and questioning Dacey about it later - subtly, of course - left him with more questions than answers. She hadn't seen a tent, she didn't think anything of the faded pink marks around Eddard's neck. To her, the tent and Lady Hermione didn't exist.

In the Great Hall of the castle they were occupying, in front of the large hearth, Robb stared into the flames and ignored the raucous laughs of soldiers around him enjoying their meal, the constant hum of conversation and the feel of numerous eyes on their silent King.

Robb felt, more than saw, someone come to stand just behind his left, hovering. Pausing.

He turned his head, partially, glancing from the corner of his periphery to see Eddard. There was still a faint, pink line around his neck, from ear to ear, where the Kingslayer's sword had cut through the tender flesh, and where Lady Hermione had healed him.

"Eddard?" asked Robb, tilting his head just slightly but returning his eyes to the fire.

"Milord…" his Karstark cousin and Kingsguard trailed off, shuffling before standing straight.

Robb sighed. When he spoke, his voice was tired. Weary. "What is it, Edd?"

"My father noticed the scar," the tall man said quietly. "And Torrhen… spoke while under the influence of the milk of Poppy, when he had his wound stitched up."

Robb winced. Wonderful. Just what I need - people speaking about what happened when we - no, Lady Hermione - captured the Kingslayer.

"What was said?" he asked instead, his body stiffening in preparation for the worst.

Eddard grimaced, but Robb didn't see it. "He spoke of a strange young woman with powers. Called her a witch, and that she helped saved Torrhen's life. And helped us capture the Kingslayer."

By the Gods…! Robb's molars ground. Karstark was a braggart, brash at times, but proud of his sons and their place near their Stark cousins; there were still moments of bittersweet jealousy that rang through the man's voice - not that Eddard or Torrhen shared their father's thoughts - but still! Karstark could jeopardise the support he had of others within the Northern camp.

"Has he spoken to anyone else about this?" asked Robb tightly, his voice pitched low, barely suppressing the anger.

Eddard paused, and Robb shut his eyes tightly. His kingsguard's voice was small when he finally
replied. "A few of the other Lords."

'A few of the other Lords' ended up being *all of them*, and by the following evening, Robb had a pounding headache as his war room - filled with his generals, Northern Lords all except his Tully uncle - spoke over one another, debating their next moves as well as Lady Hermione.

"...think we should meet with her," demanded Karstark, crossing his arms. "If only, of course, to thank her for saving my son's life."

*Of course,* thought Robb, straining in the effort to not roll his eyes. Behind him, he felt Eddard shift guiltily.

"Perhaps we could make an offer of allegiance?" suggested another Lord, and Jon Umber guffawed a laugh.

"If that witch is as powerful as the Karstark boys say she is, then she doesn't need us," he expanded - and Robb felt miffed that the man could roll his eyes to punctuate his point.

"You said she was in the clearing where the Kingslayer was captured?" asked a quiet, reedy voice.

Robb turned his gaze to the pale eyes of Roose Bolton. He dipped his head, minutely.

"Why don't we just return there on our way towards Lannisport?" asked another, and then there were murmurs of agreement. "We can ride past it."

And that was how, a day later, Robb found himself leading members of his Kingsguard - Eddard, a contrite Torrhen, and curious Dacey - as well as Karstark, Bolton, Umber, and his mother towards the clearing where he met Lady Hermione for the first time. Grey Wind prowled alongside his horse, sniffing the ground and darting this way and that as he lead the party, separate but not far from the rest of the war band, through the undergrowth.

Eventually, they reached the same clearing.

And there, off to the side, was the green tent.

Robb quietly sighed and slid off his horse, patting its flank absently as Eddard and Torrhen joined him. However, the men with him, and Dacey and his mother, looked around in confusion.

"There's nothing here," rumbled Umber, glancing around.

Eddard silently pointed at the tent, and all eyes moved there, none resting on the green fabric except those who had been in the clearing a week previous.

As the men arranged themselves behind Robb in two rows of a tight semicircle, his Kingsguard making the first, Robb stepped forward and loudly cleared his throat.

And, from behind the tent, a frazzled voice answered.

"I'm not buying whatever it is you're selling!"

Robb felt his lips twitch. At his side, Grey Wind sat himself on his haunches and looked up at his master with his tongue rolling out.

*Oh yes,* thought Robb, glancing behind at spotting the very confused and taken aback looks on the other's faces. *This will be entertaining.*
After the terrible interruption of her work, Hermione returned to scribbling out arithmancy equations, hoping that one of them would be the correct one that could explain just how the hell she ended up in another dimension to begin with.

It took two days for her to realize she just didn't have enough information about the damn place to plug into the gaping holes in her equation and that she would need to either a) make friends, or b) explore the strange world on her own. She opted for b, as the strange medieval warriors didn't stick around after the scuffle she was privy to.

(She also didn't think most of them would answer her questions; the blonde, Malfoy-esque one that tried to cut her down with his sword was probably the norm, given how the others were dressed, despite fighting him - honestly, incest? Who was stupid enough to do that? Didn't they know about genetics? Or was bloodletting cutting-edge medical technology?)

So Hermione did some quick, short Apparation jumps, from her clearing to a spot between the trees she could see, and then from there to another, and another, until she was in the middle of a field and then was able to see some thatched roofs and stone buildings in the distance.

In order to not spook the local natives, she chose to walk into town.

And nearly walked right back out the second she took in the smell. Great Merlin - the smell was terrible. It wasn't just manure from the fields and animals, but also the smell of unwashed bodies, and rotting food, and sweat and blood and burnt corpses that a few people were desperately trying to bury.

The majority of the houses were burnt out - she guessed that was where the corpses came from - and the small hamlet of barely maybe ten houses was utterly destroyed and raided.

A small part of her hoped it wasn't the redhead with bright blue eyes and his army who did the raiding.

Luckily, there weren't any language barriers.

Unluckily, the jeans-and-jumper combo she wore out of comfort wasn't high in fashion in this dimension, and it made those who remained in the small hamlet wary of her.

It took some aggressive negotiations and wide-smiles for her to express that she wasn't there to hurt anyone. She resigned herself to helping dig graves.

But she did gain some valuable information: she was between the Riverlands and Lannister-owned land. There was a war going on (no shit), but there were several interested parties who all claimed to be "king" (the redhead didn't want the crown of the main castle, which she learned was in King's Landing - how original - but rather was the Young Wolf, something about avenging his father; she didn't really care.), the "small folk" as they called themselves were tired of the war and their homes being burnt and their men being conscripted as soldiers and their women raped and, and, and.

Hermione had been through war before. It was painful, and even now, barely a year later, she still had nightmares.

This was just exhausting.

In the end, the small folk of the tiny hamlet she stumbled upon weren't educated enough to help her or answer her questions - in fact, "what kind of orbit does this planet engage in around your sun?" responded with blank stares.
Eventually, one brave soul said, "I think you'll need to go to the Citadel, milady, if you want answers to your questions."

Hermione nodded enthusiastically. "Yes - this Citadel. Where is it?"

"Oldtown."

"And where is Oldtown?"

"Somewhere... west?"

"How far west?"

"A couple weeks, I'd reckon."

"... by foot?"

"From here? Yes..."

"And is there a library?"

"What's a library?"

"What do you mean, 'what's a library'? Where do people go to learn things here?"

"Oldtown."

Frustrated and biting back an unbecoming growl, Hermione handed over some of her rations from her tent as a thanks, walked back into the forest she emerged from until she was out of sight, and then Apparated back to her tent with a sharp crack, feeling tired.

At this rate, she was never going to figure out how to get out of this dimension!

She was in preparation for a long journey to this Oldtown, several days later. Brewing Pepper-Up was child's play, something she mastered in her first year at Hogwarts.

Hermione just wasn't expecting to hear a throat being loudly cleared outside her tent! She had proximity alerts woven into her wards and spells that she cast when she, Harry and Ron were on the run, so she knew that there were several people wandering into the clearing, but only three were focusing their attention on where her tent was located.

You have got to be joking, she mentally groaned, realizing who came back.

She looked down at her potion and then shouted, "I'm not buying whatever it is you're selling!"

There was silence, and she sighed, a small smile on her lips as she gathered up the crushed leaves on the flat of her knife and then began to carefully tap them into the potion.

The throat cleared again, louder, different - as if someone else did that. Her hand slipped as she was about to tap the leaves in, dumping it all in one go.

The potion turned a violent, bright orange and Hermione stared at it in horror. She had never pulled a Longbottom before!

There was a new voice that cautiously, but loudly and in a slower tone, ask, "Ah - Lady - Hermione? Are - you - there?"
The potion rumbled.

Angrily, Hermione turned her face towards the tent's opening and shouted, "PISS OFF! I'm very busy here!"

The rumbling continued, and there was blissful silence outside her tent. She scrambled for something to counteract the mandrake leaves she was using, needing something chalky to bring down the acidity.

"Oh, oh, c'mon, c'mon," she muttered under her breath, turning away from the potion to check through her potions' trunk, filled with all manner of ingredients. However, the potion began spewing thick yellow clouds, and Hermione sighed.

"What a waste," she thought, and cast a shield charm over the cauldron to contain the explosion. The rumbling intensified and then burst, turning the air above the cauldron into a violent, rolling noxious yellow ball of gas. The scent of sulphur managed to escape the shield and Hermione hastily threw up a bubble-head charm around herself.

"Ugh," she said, eyes cutting towards the tent entrance.

Temper firmly in hand, she stalked forward and shoved the flap aside, her eyes meeting the wide blue one's of the redhead from before - the one the small folk called the Young Wolf. There were several others behind him, arranged in a semi-circle, including, Hermione was amused to see, a wolf. As one, they all took a step back as the fumes wafted out of her tent, a few strangling gasps as she appeared.

"What do you want? You interrupted my brewing and now my tent is going to stink for a week!"

"Erm, Lady…" a burly looking man trailed off, looking her up and down. "Lady Hermione?"

"What?" she growled, turning to look at him directly. Her first impression was if someone had merged a white-haired Karkaroff and Marcus Flint, for the man had the bearing and attitude of the old Durmstrang Headmaster, but the body of the Slytherin Quidditch captain.

"Milady," the man said, rallying himself and stepping forward, but not past the redhead - out of respect? She wasn't sure. "I am Lord Rickard Karstark. I wish to extend my gratitude towards you for saving the life of my sons. It was only because of you and your… magic… that Eddard survived."

Hermione eyed the man for a moment, glancing towards the young man she saved a week previous, having kept his skin together and repairing the damage. He shuffled a bit, not much, but enough to convey his displeasure and embarrassment at his father's grovelling - and Hermione could see the family resemblance in the long, square face, and the small eyes.

She sighed. "No thanks are needed, Lord Karstark."

"Please," the man continued. "It's a matter of honour. May we… speak?"

"Aren't we doing that now?" she asked, crossing her arms.

The Young Wolf stepped forward, drawing her eyes. "Lady Hermione, while Lord Karstark would like to speak to you in thanks for his sons - I too would like to extend my gratitude as Eddard and Torrhen are members of my Kingsguard and friends. Their loss would have pained me."

"Perhaps we could speak here?" a tall, redheaded woman spoke for the first time.
Hermione shook her head. "It's hardly comfortable. I have a couch." She turned to motioned at her tent.

"Erm…"

"Oh? The smell?" Hermione grinned at the tall redheaded Young Wolf, waving her hand. A bit of wandless magic to impress the natives wasn't something that was going to bite her in the arse, she thought, as the air whooshed out of her tent and then up past them with the force of a strong wind, nudging a few to step back in surprise against the flow.

"What smell?" she concluded, and then ducked inside.

Robb felt amusement bubble in his stomach and did his best to keep his face neutral. Lady Hermione's initial shout had confused Karstark. The proud man's face had quickly fallen into confusion and was verging on abject horror when she told him to "piss off." Even if the words - or slang? - was unknown, the message behind it was clear.

On Karstark's other side, Umber tipped his chin down and smothered his smile into his beard. When Lady Hermione emerged from the tent, however, the entire situation became tense. Perhaps his Lords and mother were expecting someone older - someone wearing long dresses and robes? Maybe even the bright red eyes of the Ashaii?

They weren't expecting a tiny, young woman of an age similar to his and Dacey's, barely reaching his chin. She wore men's trousers and a long, loose tunic, and something about its shape and size had Robb thinking it was a men's tunic. She wore strange white shoes instead of going barefoot. Her brown hair was still as messy and curly as before, but this time was a tumbling mess piled high on her head and held in place with a - Robb took a double glance; yes, those are four quills in her hair, holding it all up.

Karstark continued to make a mess of his first impression, prompting Robb to step forward. He didn't have to, but a part of him wanted those amber eyes back on him and him alone.

And when she disappeared back into her tent, he was the first to follow her.

Immediately, however, he stopped, looked around with an open mouth, and then stepped back outside.

"Robb?" his mother asked, cautiously and her voice tight with worry.

He shook his head, did a quick walk around the tent to everyone else's confusion, and then strode back inside, Grey Wind slinking in behind him, eyes wide and taking in the much larger interior space.

Hermione was standing near what could only be a stove of some sort due to the heat it was emitting, calmly watching him from beyond the rim of a mug she brought to her mouth.

He took a few steps forward, eyes roving from one end of the tent to the other: from his left, an oddly-designed kitchen, and to his right, a living space where Lady Hermione stood, framed by a soft looking seating area and chairs. There was a low lying table in the middle of a colourful rug in the living space, its top covered with piles of books - open and closed - and rolls of parchment and ink bottles.

Beyond, he could see a small hallway and doors, leading further into the tent.
It's a bloody tent! This looks like the inside of a crofter's home! he thought, eyes wide. Behind him, Eddard, Torrhen, his mother as well as Karstark and Bolton stepped forward, each exclaiming wordlessly at the extreme difference.

"Please, would you like to sit?" offered Lady Hermione with all the graciousness of a high-ranking Lady, a sweeping gesture at the furniture around her. Robb immediately went towards one of the armchairs, Eddard and Torrhen flanking him by standing behind and beside it; his mother sat gingerly on the - couch? Lady Hermione had called it - with Bolton and Karstark nervously eyeing the room and remaining standing. Grey Wind immediately moved towards her, and Robb was intensely curious to see how she would handle a large direwolf stalking towards her.

If his men - and mother - were expecting shrieks and cries to call his wolf off - they were disappointed. Hermione's bright eyes lit up at the wolf, and Robb could practically hear her mentally squee puppy! Grey Wind huffed at her, curling behind and then flopping on the carpet in front of where the heat from coming from, picking the best spot to drop into a nap.

"Tea? Coffee?" she asked, a glint in her eyes, turning back to Robb.

There was silence, and Robb broke it with a quick flash of a smile at her. "What is it that you are drinking?"

Lady Hermione paused and turned her attention on him. "Hot chocolate."

"I would like that, then," said Robb, mentally patting himself on his back as they began opening negotiations, demonstrating that he was eager to meet her halfway and get to know her.

Lady Hermione nodded, and made a sharp hand movement with right, flicking it out and making everyone startle; Bolton and Karstark both reached for the pommels of their swords.

"Just my wand," she said evenly, pointing it forward as it was held aloft in her grip, loose. Bolton nearly scrambled out of the way, his back towards the kitchen, but moved with forced dignity closer to the tent flap.

All their eyes were drawn to the kitchen space, where a pot floated from a low cupboard up onto a stove. A cool box opened and a clear jug of something white floated out - milk? thought Robb - and the poured into the small pot. A flame burst into existence under the pot, and the milk began to boil. At the same time, another cupboard door opened and a smaller jar in bright purple floated down, the lid popping off with a small burst of brown powder.

Robb's eyes were wide as he watched the dance: a spoon joined, as did a mug, and then the powder was mixed into the mug just as the milk finished boiling and was poured into the mug - all without Lady Hermione touching it.

The mug then floated towards him, and he reached out with shaking hands to take it.

"Milord, perhaps I…?" began Torrhen quietly, as his food taster.

He shook his head. If Lady Hermione wanted to kill him, she wouldn't need to poison him with a drink of this 'hot chocolate.' He cut a glance towards his mother, who had a pinched look on her face.

He cautiously took a sip of the hot drink, the mug warming his hands even through the gloves he wore. The taste was sweet and strong, but pleasant and he hummed his appreciation.

Once he brought the mug down from his lips, Lady Hermione grinned and sat on the opposite side of
the couch from his mother, relaxing into the cushions.

"So," she began, eyeing them all individually for a moment, "What did you want to talk about?"

"Lady Hermione," began Karstark, "Again, my thanks-"

"Not needed," the young witch broke in, shaking her head and dislodging a curl. Robb stared at it. "I saved your son because it was the right thing to do, Lord Karstark. Not because I expect or want payment."

That wrongfooted Karstark, who floundered for a moment. "Well. In, uh, that case, my Lady… I understand that you might not want or expect repayment, but my honour demands it."

Warily, Lady Hermione eyed him and kept silent.

The old Lord cleared his throat and a flash of something passed across her face before disappearing. "I notice that you are alone, Lady Hermione."

Robb interpreted the look on her face as so what? and, surprised, glanced around the space, looking for evidence of someone else. Other than the large tunic Lady Hermione was wearing, it appeared she was truly alone.

"With a debt owed you, perhaps you would consider a marriage alliance between yourself and one of my sons?"

What? Robb choked and sputtered a bit on his hot chocolate, a small trickle slipping down his chin as he caught it with a gloved hand, staring at Karstark and then at Hermione, who stared at the Lord. Grey Wind's eyes opened and his head lifted from his spot in front of the stove.

Her eyes slowly moved over to Eddard and Torrhen, both who were radiating such embarrassment that Robb could feel it, like a heat rolling off them.

There was something dismissive, but also apologetic in Hermione’s glance towards Torrhen and Eddard, before she turned back to Karstark. "Lord Karstark, I am," her mouth pulled, "Honoured at the offer, but I am quite happy as I am and currently have no plans of marriage. Least of all from someone I don't know."

"So you’d be open and willing if you knew someone better?" asked Bolton, his thin and soft voice loud in the silence of the tent.

Robb held his breath, watching Hermione as she frowned and let the silence stretch between them as she considered her answer.

"I don't think the current circumstances I find myself in would be conductive for a marriage," she eventually said.

"What circumstance is that?" his mother asked, her voice tight.

Hermione turned to face her, an airy hand dismissing the conversation. "Nothing important."

Catelyn’s face pinched further, and Robb winced.

"Well, then what can we offer?" asked a frustrated Karstark.

"Maps," replied Hermione promptly. "I was told information I might need could be found in Oldtown, but I don't know where that is."
"What information are you looking for?" asked Catelyn. "We have several Maesters who are some of the best in all of Westeros."

Hermione hummed low. "Westeros," she breathed, eyes lit up with more information. She slid off the couch to the floor, ignoring the bewildered looks she was getting. Robb leaned forward and watched as she rummaged through the scrolls and parchment, muttering under her breath until she found what she was looking for.

She reached for one of the quills in her hair, and a portion tumbled down, leaving her in a wildly disheveled look that was incredibly fetching. Robb felt a flush spread across the back of his neck and up his ears.

She began scribbling on the parchment, adding strange symbols and squiggles that might have been another language, ignoring everyone else in the room. Robb shared a glance with both Karstark and Bolton; Karstark looked frustrated, as though Hermione was not at all what he expected, but there was a strange, fascinated look on Bolton's face.

"Um, Lady Hermione?" prompted Robb, leaning forward again, almost over the low table in front of him. The witch ignored him - or, thought Robb, was so engrossed in what she was doing she didn't hear him at all - so he tried again. "Hermione?"

Startled, she looked up, eyes wide. "What?"

"You said 'maps,'" reminded Robb, biting back a smile. "Anything else?"

"Maps?" repeated Hermione, blinking. "Maps? Oh. OH! Yes."

She blushed and carefully set down the quill and sat back on the couch, demurely folding her hands in her lap. "History books would be helpful. Science, too, perhaps." She eyed them, and then turned to Bolton, sussing him out as potentially the most science-oriented. "What's the planetary orbit around your sun like?"

The fascination in Bolton's face turned into something else even as he replied to her with, "I beg your pardon?"

"Nevermind," she said, waving her hand. "Oldtown. How far is it?"

"Several hundred leagues and at least a month's journey," replied Karstark, badly hiding his ire. "And certainly not something you can manage on your own, Lady Hermione."

"Mmm," she said, and something in her eyes prompted Robb to offer, "Why don't you join us?"

Immediately, Robb felt six pairs of eyes settle on him, and he squared his shoulders back as much as he could, attempting to present a confident face.

"I'm sorry?" asked Hermione, turning her amber eyes on him. He felt his breath catch.

Robby leaned forward. "We're journeying westward, towards Lannisport. Oldtown is to the southwest. If you join us - at least, some of the way - you'll be protected and can speak with our Maesters. And then when you're ready, you can continue south, although I don't think it's very safe."

He held her gaze, holding firm against the strange colour and hoping his own conveyed his thoughts and wishes. Finally, after a very long, tense silence, Hermione slowly nodded.

And like that, the Northern campaign gained a witch.
After they left the tent, Roose Bolton waited until they had left the clearing and were within sight of the main host, a few paces behind his King, to speak. He came to a stop beside Robb Stark, both of them leading their horses and pausing at the same time to look at one another.

Robb couldn't quite make out the expression on Bolton's face - it was one he had never seen before; partial awe, confusion, and something unreservedly fierce.

When the man spoke, it was in his usual, quiet, reedy voice - but the words themselves could've been shouted for the effect they had on Robb, rocking him backwards in surprise.

"Marry the witch, your Highness, and we'll win the war within a week. She's the best thing that's ever happened to Westeros, and she's going to change everything."

TBC
The Winter Witch III

Hermione decided to take her time packing up her tent. Not that there was much to pack, to begin with, but despite how blase she was when she agreed to join Robb Stark's army, she was beginning to have second thoughts.

Not necessarily regrets. Just… thoughts.

Thoughts like:

What were his goals?

What was his purpose?

What were their numbers like and how were their foot soldiers treated?

How far was this Lannisport?

What was wrong with that Bolton man?

Why did they not know their planet's orbit?

Of course, those were only among the few that were bothering her, but - safety in numbers (as safe as one could be in an army, anyway) - and she could bother people for information about Westeros. Surely there was someone out there who knew the planet's orbit? Knew the general location of Westeros in relation to the rest of the world? How old the planet was or what system it was in?

Surely?

So, there she was: standing the middle of her albeit small living room, the wood-burning fireplace doused and the plates and glasses that were in the kitchen sink gleaming and clean, back in their secured cabinets. Her hands were tightly gripping the cross-body strap of her beaded bag, knuckles white with tension. There was no reason to delay - she was ready to go.

But she hesitated.

It's a new world, out there, she thought, nervously fingering a loose thread to her jumper. Quite literally a new world.

There was a lot that could go wrong: her magic might not always be compatible. She might spark a new wave of witch hunts. Her new allies might turn on her when they realize what she's capable of - after all, she didn't endear herself to Karstark, or to Robb's mother.

Hermione sighed. Procrastination wasn't going to get her anywhere - literally - so with her wand in one hand and her confidence in the other, she stepped out of the tent and - blinked.

The very, very large and burly man that didn't join the others in her tent earlier was leaning against the wide trunk of a tree, his entire body width nearly covering the ancient trunk. His arms were crossed, and a rather large sword hung at his side. Hermione eyed it warily.
Opposite him, standing at attention and poorly hiding a scowl, was a lithe young woman around Hermione's age with dark brown hair pulled back in a thick braid. Her dark eyes fixed solidly on Hermione the moment she stepped out of the green tent.

"Erm," said Hermione, eyes darting back and forth between the two. "Hello."

"Afternoon," rumbled the large man. He too was eyeing her carefully - like one might a spooked horse.

Hermione bit back a sigh. Taking a few steps forward, forcefully, she considered sticking her hand out for a shake but then second-guessed herself; medieval world, daring swordfights... she retracted the hand and tilted her chin up instead in a painfully familiar pose. "Hermione Granger. How do you do?"

The large man stared down at her, and from behind his beard there was a small twitch and he then grinned. "Jon Umber."

Hermione nodded and turned to the woman in armour. Her scowl slipped into a frown and she muttered, in two very punctured words, "Dacey. Mormont."

Echoing another awkward introduction seven years previous, Hermione kept her nose from wrinkling as she replied, "Pleasure."

She turned her back on the two - because if she couldn't trust them to not attack her now, she'd never be able to trust or do anything later - and flicked her wand, nonverbally dismantling the tent. It crumbled in on itself, folding over and over again until it was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, which it leapt from the ground into. She then opened the beaded bag and tucked it in.

When she turned around, both Jon Umber and Dacey Mormont looked flabbergasted.

"What?" she asked. It was enough to draw their attention back to her.

"Is that - um - everything of yours, milady?" Umber asked, with only a slight pause as his eyes trailed back over to where the tent used to be.

Hermione nodded.

"Good," he rumbled, drawing up and away from the tree to stand tall and holy Merlin, Morgana and Mordred, he's like seven feet tall and could give Hagrid a run for his Galleons. "We'll be going to Riverrun, then."

"Riverrun?" asked Hermione, and the three began to walk out of the small clearing, in the opposite direction Hermione took on her village scouting mission. Umber led the way, and Dacey followed behind, a prickle between Hermione's shoulders as the other woman kept her eyes on her.

Umber nodded. "Lord Stark wants to start pushing the army westward within the next few days but we need to prepare first." He glanced back over his shoulder at her briefly. "There will be a feast for successfully capturing the Kinslayer that was put off until now, and he wants you to feel comfortable, as well as show you the maps we have."

Behind Hermione, Dacey snorted.

Hermione kept her eyes resolutely forward. "I see. So what is Riverrun? A castle? Hold fast? Fort?"

"A castle, although that implies it's small," answered Umber. "It's the family seat of Tully - Lady
Stark's family. Her father is Lord Paramount but is in ill health."

"Seems a bit in bad taste to throw a party when someone's grandfather is lying in their deathbed upstairs," commented Hermione, shifting her perception of Robb Stark.

Dacey pushed past Hermione, bumping her shoulder into the witch’s as she strode by to stand next to Umber. "Lord Stark is a brilliant man and does not do anything in poor taste!"

She quickly took the lead, leaving Umber and Hermione by themselves, surrounded by tall trees and in the cool shade of their leaves. Hermione pursed her lips, eyes narrowed as she stared at the lithe woman's back.

"Is she normally like that?" she asked, glancing out of the corner of her eye at Umber, who just shook his head.

"That?" his nose twitched. "She's being positively cheerful."

Hermione's face eerily matched Dacey's earlier one, but despite knowing it, Umber kept the thought to himself.

Robb did his best not to fidget as he waited in the inner courtyard of his grandfather's ancestral seat, spreading his legs, firmly planting his feet on the flagstone. He crossed his arms across his chest in a powerful pose, and accompanied by a glowering, solemn air, kept an empty radius of five feet around him. Scouts had noticed Umber, Dacey and Hermione, and now Robb's entire entourage spread out behind him in a welcome. Rumours had swirled around the castle in the hours since his return and his order of preparing a room for Lady Hermione - which had the Frey allies among them poorly hiding their disdain.

As if he could forget that ridiculous marriage contract his mother forced on him!

He sighed.

In the privacy of his own mind he could admit he found Hermione to be interesting - even enticing, with her corkscrew curls and disheveled appearance, especially as she had little to no care towards anything from him.

Being in charge of the Northern army, not to mention the heir to Winterfell, meant he had to be wary of any and all single - and even some married - women in his acquaintance. Hermione, however…

*I'm pretty sure all that is on her mind is to go home*, he thought ruefully. *Not like I know where that is. Beyond Ashaii, perhaps? South, so far south of the Summer Isles?*

And then, his thoughts turned outward, because Umber and Dacey appeared on the back of their horses. Immediately, Robb frowned, looking for the third member that was supposed to be with them.

*Where is she?* his heart pounded, pausing at the next, horrible thought: *She is no longer coming.*

And then a wild riot of curls peeked around Umber's large frame, and her curious face and angled, pointed chin was turned upwards as she observed the flags of Winterfell, of the Northern lords, as well as the Tully and Frey banners, flying high above off the turrets and ramparts.

Daryn, one of his guard who had the fortune of not being hurt by the Kingslayer that evening they met Lady Hermione, stepped forward and helped her off the horse. She stood next to Umber's
massive warhorse for a moment or two, an expression flashing across her face that Robb stifled a laugh for; he had seen it before on Sansa, who preferred carriages over horseback.

"Welcome to Riverrun, Lady Hermione," he said, drawing her attention from nearly kissing the dirty flagstone in appreciation, back to him. His heart began pounding furiously and quickly once her amber-like eyes turned to him.

"Hello," she greeted, glancing this way and that. She began walking toward him and his receiving line, all familiar faces. "Thank you for having me."

From the corner of his eye, he saw his mother's face pinch, and behind her, as she slid off her horse gracefully, Dacey didn't hide the roll of her eyes. God's teeth, this could be a problem… despite the amusing niceties her etiquette training suggests.

"Riverrun is pleased to have you, Lady Hermione," enthused Robb, wondering whether he could get away with putting a hand on her back, but under his mother's quelling glare, cocked out his elbow for her instead. "Shall I give you a tour before your retire to your room? To prepare for the feast tonight?"

She hummed her agreement, and gingerly slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, not his bicep as was proper, but lower, curling her fingers almost possessively.

He shivered.

Eddard, Daryn, and Torrhen followed while his mother made murmurs of checking on the feast, and Dacey and Umber left to groom their horses, and Robb felt he could breathe a bit easier. Entertaining foreign guests had never happened previously - other than the brief time he was in charge of his father's old friend's children, Meera and Jojen Reed, and even then, they were quick to attach themselves to Bran's side. Even the Freys, while at the Towers, or under their beady, suspicious eyes, he had never felt as nervous or bumbling as a young man visit the whore house for the first time.

He scrambled for something to say as they started up one of the large, sweeping stairs to the second floor, and blurted, "You don't seem to care much for the grandeur of Riverrun, milady?"

Stupid, stupid, stupid, he chastised mentally immediately, flushing heavily. Behind him, he heard an aborted snicker and a sigh and fought from spinning around and glaring at the Karstarks and Hornwood behind him, enjoying his fumbles with the witch.

"I spent my formative years in a castle," explained Hermione, seemingly ignoring the noises behind him as his attention was back on her.

"Oh?" he asked, hoping the tiny noise would prompt her further as they meandered down a wide and well-lit hall, framed with tapestries.

She nodded. "I attended school in a castle, and let's just say: Hogwarts was… magical." She finished her sentence with a twist to her lips and a sparkle in her eyes at the pun.

"You attended school?" he echoed, brows furrowed. "You were not educated at home, by a Maester?"

"We don't have maesters," she replied, "but teachers - or, professors. Mine were professors, specialists in their fields. Hogwarts offered seven years of schooling from eleven to seventeen before we were legally considered adults and let out on the world."
"You seem very proficient in your magic, Lady Hermione," complimented Robb, catching her eyes. "You must have had quite the seven years at the school."

A shuttered look fell across Hermione's face, and she glanced down at her left arm, the one curled around Robb's right. "Six years," she murmured, but then looked up and her face brightened. "A beloved professor of mine once called me the Brightest Witch of my Age." She smiled, a bit wickedly, and added, "Capitals implied for a full title, of course."

He grinned back, sure it looked as goofy as it felt.

"Of course," he agreed, and then steered her towards one large (and open) door. "Please," he said, gesturing, "This is Maester Vyman's rooms. As our Maester, he is the best person to aid you in what you need to know."

They stepped into the room, with only Eddard, as Torrhen and Daryn remained on either side of the open door facing out. Hermione's face turned to one of curiosity, taking in the large bookshelves filled with knick-knacks and bottles and jars of various shapes, of the long table in the middle of the room, filled with beakers and pestle and mortars, with rolled and unrolled scrolls and a large inkpot and quill.

The old Maester himself was hunched over a parchment, scribbling notes of some sort, and looked up only after a few moments.

"My Lord!" he gasped, eyes wide and standing immediately. Robb watched Hermione eye him curiously, but nodded a greeting back to his grandfather's man.

"Maester Vyman," he said, "This is Lady Hermione. She was instrumental in the Kingslayer's capture, and in repayment, has only asked for our help and knowledge to aid her in returning home."

The tall, skinny and white-haired man nodded, rheumy eyes turning from his liege to the woman beside him.

"Lady Hermione," he greeted, stiffly, if not polite but without the warmth that Robb greeted her with. "How may I assist?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "I need maps, detailed enough to know where we are position in Riverrun in comparison to other major landmarks. As well as any books you might have on the planet and geography, planets, and astronomy."

Vyman blinked. "I - ah - Lady Hermione - maps I can supply, of course, and perhaps I can show you some of the texts we have on geographical positioning, but… I do not understand why astronomy?"

Hermione stared at the Maester. "To… understand… the position of this planet in relation to the sun? And the other planets? And its moon? And where we are in the galaxy? You know - planetary sciences? Astronomical science?"

Vyman looked as mystified as Robb felt. "Planetary sciences, My Lady? I suppose I have some information on the Red Comet that hangs in the sky, but I confess I am not sure what else you mean."

Hermione stared at Vyman, who stared back.

Then, she sighed. "Well, I guess that is somewhere we can start."

Robb sent a glare at the Maester, who grimaced and laced his fingers and folded his wrinkled hands
in front of him. "Well, there always is the library."

Hermione's head popped up and she asked, "You have a library?!"

Vyman walked around the table and, alongside Robb, directed her to the large Tully library on the opposite side of the castle, with Robb's guards silently following. He ignored the growing boredom in the description of the library - similar to Winterfell's - that Vyman espoused, going on about the scrolls from such-and-such Targaryen reign, or from the Nine-Penny War, or from before the Doom.

And then, once they stepped inside the library, Vyman's voice trailed off without an audience, as Hermione disappeared into the stacks, leaving five very confused men behind.

Now, this is more like it, thought Hermione with a happy little sigh, firmly planting her butt on a chair by a table, already with at least ten books in front of her and five scrolls put to the side. She plopped her beaded back on the empty chair beside her, and dug into it, her arm disappearing well up to her shoulder, forcing her to angle her chin away to reach into its depths. She finally grabbed a parchment and inkwell and quill, yanking them out and after dipping the nib into the inkwell and gently shaking the excess off, began to take notes.

A cramped hand and three hours later, her happiness had soured down to 'Harry and Ron levels of stupid about to get expelled for not listening to her' annoyance.

Dacey, the unfortunate one chosen to seek her out and remind her to prepare for the feast that evening, appeared at Hermione's elbow, the scowl on her face not detracting from her pretty looks.

"The feast will begin soon," the Mormont soldier began succinctly. "As Lord Stark's - guest - you are required to attend."

Hermione barely heard the woman and looked up at her plaintively. "Dacey," she began, eyes wide, "Why hasn't there been a study about the position of your continent relative to its place on this planet?"

Dacey, wrongfooted, stared at Hermione. "What?"

"Has no one done soil deposit studies to know how old your planet is?" continued Hermione, her voice rising with each passing sentence. "What about even naming your planet? What's it called? It can't be as bad as mine; ours is earth, which literally means dirt. We named our planet dirt - this one isn't anything embarrassing in comparison, I promise! And what about your moon? The comet? You've had asteroids land, I know that much - the text here, Auld Mythes and Legendes alludes that Valyrian steel comes from ore deposits from an asteroid, not like the author actually understands what he's writing - so why hasn't anyone done a more thorough study? And -"

"Please stop," groaned Dacey, and Hermione, realizing she was turning a breathless verbal vomit reminiscent of her earliest Hogwarts days into a rant, snapped her mouth shut.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"Why do you need all this-" Dacey waved her hand, "Information?"

Hermione blinked. "To go home."

"Home?" repeated Dacey, skeptically, eyeing the texts and scrolls. She crossed her arms. "Can you not just book passage on a ship?"
Hermione snorted, ducking her head. "Um, no."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not from here."

Dacey rolled her eyes - a truly expressive roll - and looked down at Hermione with a sneer on her red lips. "So you've said, but what does that mean?" Her eyes narrowed. "If you are here to hurt Lord Stark, or sabotage the army, I swear on the Old Gods-!"

Hermione pushed back from the table quickly, standing and facing the irate woman whose hand had moved from being crossed to resting on the sword she carried at her hip.

"God, no!" implored Hermione, staring at Dacey. "I swear I'm not here to hurt anyone! Or sabotage anything! Honest!"

The two women stared at each other for a long, tense moment, but then Dacey nodded and slowly removed her hand from the hilt. "Then, explain it to me."

Hermione sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I'm from another world."

At Dacey's blank stare, Hermione's next sigh was even louder. "Okay, look - um..." she grabbed the parchment she had finished taking notes on and picked up her quill. She drew a circle on one side, and then another, making sure there was a tiny smudge of overlap: a Venn diagram without the middle connection. She wrote in one, Earth, and in the other, after a contemplative frown, wrote Westeros/Easteros/Summer Isles, etc.

She pointed at her circle. "This is where I am from: Earth, my planet. I was walking through the Forbidden Forest near my school - Hogwarts - because I was looking to treat with the Centaurs. Except I kept walking. And walking, and walking some more. Finally I pitched my tent and tried to figure out where I was, but during my walk, I somehow... slid between my world, and ended up in yours." She let her finger trail and smudge the line between Earth and Westeros.

"That is not possible," argued Dacey, baldly.

"Is so!" argued back Hermione, snapping her eyes up at the slightly taller woman. "It's called quantum physics! I slipped through a wormhole between two dimensions and ended up here! None of the constellations match, Dacey! None. You have Crone's Lantern and Sword in the Morning-" Hermione yanked forward one of the books and jabbed a finger at the drawn starmap, and then pointed at her old Astronomy text from Hogwarts. "-and I have the Dipper, and Orion's Belt. They look nothing alike."

Dacey's gaze turned from haughty to thoughtful as she looked at the two books, comparing them; perhaps, in Hermione's eyes, not so much the content as she should, but rather the quality of the paper, the ink, the binding.

She then flipped to the cover, and her eyes darted up at the inside title page, along with the copyright and ISBN that modern texts were beginning to copy from their muggle counterparts, appealing to the increased number of Muggleborns in the magical world post-Blood War.

Finally, her eyes met Hermione's, and a swell of triumph - similar to when she cast her first Patronus and the otter galloped around her in the Room of Requirement - because, even before she spoke, she believed.

"What do you need?" asked Dacey.
"Land deposits," immediately replied Hermione, turning back to the parchment, and then shifting it to reveal another one underneath. There were several lines of bulleted points. "Preferably asteroid deposits, but I'm not picky. Information on the seven planets also in orbit with this sun. Detailed charts of moon orbit and season length going back at least three hundred years. Detailed maps."

Dacey frowned. "Much of that is impossible to find, let alone be lying around - even in a castle such as this. It could take years to collect this information."

Hermione's face fell. Years?

"Lord Stark promised his help," said Dacey, and her voice was the softest Hermione had ever heard it. It prompted her to look up at she noted that the woman's brown eyes had gone gooey, like melted chocolate instead of the hard, brittle look she normally wore in them when around Hermione. "He is a wonderful man who will keep his promise. But first-"

Dacey stepped back and reached forward to grab Hermione's wrist in her hand and pull her forward. "We have a feast to attend."

Hermione now groaned. "Must we?"

The feast was underway all of twenty minutes before Robb noticed Hermione - it wasn't like he was hyper aware of the time it took between when food was brought out to when she arrived, of course, no that would be silly - but because she looked so different.

Her hair was in a strange half-up, half-down mass, framing her long neck. Her dress was a pretty periwinkle blue, her arms bare and her collarbones on display with a square neck and dress that hugged her curves, gently wafting out in layered pleats. Her face even seemed different, glowing or shimmering around her eyes and her lips were as pink as a rose.

(And because Dacey was smirking beside the witch, when before she couldn't stand to be in her presence, so Robb wondered what had changed but he didn't wonder that much because God's above, was that a slit in her gown?)

Hermione strode forward, ignoring - or attempting to, Robb could see the discomfort on her face - the stares as Dacey led her behind and to the Head Table, where he sat with his mother to his left, his uncle Edmure beside her, and then his Great-Uncle Brynden; to his right, where an empty chair sat for her as his guest of honour.

"My Lord Stark," announced Dacey, eyes bright with amusement, "May I present the Lady Hermione Granger?"

He inclined his head, minutely, and Hermione turned to thank Dacey with a quiet murmur. She then glanced at the empty seat, and he jumped to his feet, just as Torrhen, who stood behind him, moved forward to pull the chair back from the table.

Hermione stared at them both, eyes wide, but then accepted the chair and gingerly sat. Robb glanced at Torrhen, who, rebuked, lowered his eyes and the young Wolf pushed the chair in gently.

Robb swallowed thickly and motioned to the platters and bowls of food in front of them. "May I, Lady Hermione?"

She nodded, and silence fell between the two as he served her from the many dishes, and then, attempted to not look like a fool watching her eat.
"Was the - ah - was the library satisfactory, milady?" he asked, fumbling the beginning as they finished their food. He had completely ignored his mother and uncle, and felt conscious of the Blackfish's amused eyes on him.

Hermione hummed thoughtfully. "It was a good starting point, but I haven't gone through everything yet. I may have to change my plans - if that's okay?"

"Change your plans?" he echoed dumbly.

She nodded, and her curls bounced and he was entranced. "Yes; stay at Riverrun longer instead of joining your army towards Lannisport." She made a face. "Especially as I now know how far everything is."

"The library, the castle; all of Riverrun is at your disposal," blurted Robb, and from his other side, he heard his mother's sharp hiss.

Fuck, he thought, I all but declared her Lady of the Castle with that. His eyes darted around the Hall, looking for the nearest Frey. Shit - did a Frey overhear? Are they going to consider that a breach in our contract? Fuck!

"That's very kind of you," said Hermione, drawing his attention again. "But I honestly just need to borrow the library. You won't even notice me, I promise."

"I doubt anyone could forget you, Lady Hermione." And there goes my mouth again. God's teeth - what am I? Three and ten and around the first maiden to give me a compliment?

"My Lord?"

Robb happily and gratefully turned in his chair to look at Torren, who was struggling between keeping a straight face and smirking as his eyes very quickly moved to Lady Hermione and then back. "The Lords are gathering for the meeting, if you're ready to join them…?"

"Yes!" he nearly shouted, rising from his chair. "Yes - I'll be right here. Uncles, will you be joining?"

Edmure and Brynden both nodded, also standing, and Robb turned back to Hermione. "Lady Hermione, Torren here will escort you to your room, and."

"Is Lady Hermione not joining us?" called Lord Karstark, over the din of the men in the Hall, drawing everyone's attention to the Head Table. Robb grit his teeth. "After all, she was the one who brought the Kingslayer to us."

Everyone's eyes turned to the witch beside Robb, and her own went wide and her face pale. "oh, no - really - honestly - I couldn't…"

"Please," added Lord Bolton, his reedy voice carrying across the now silent Hall, "Your different opinion and insight would be a breath of fresh air."

Robb, seeing he was being backed into this corner, graciously ceded the fight to his manipulative Lords. He sighed, holding out his elbow again. "Lady Hermione, this way…?"

Staring at his arm, Hermione paused, indecision on her face. He waited, patiently, but he dearly hoped she wouldn't reject him or cast some strange magic. Finally, slowly, she reached out and curled her fingers into his arm. Heat seared him, racing down his arm and straight into his stomach which tightened uncomfortably.
They led the way, past his mother and her very disapproving face; past a smirking Bolton and amused Karstark and Umber; past the Mallisters and Hornwoods and Mormonts and others, into the side room that Robb used for the Northern Lords and Lady to discuss their next move, but also to discuss what went wrong and what improvements they could make for the next battle.

He moved to his usual seat, at the head of the table, Hermione still on his arm. He gestured to the chair to his right, and, ignoring the symbolic nature, helped her into it with a swollen throat and a thick tongue, murmuring quietly to her as the others entered, "Welcome to the Northern Army, Lady Hermione."

He tried not to read too much into it -

Or the jolt of pleasure saying it had to him.

TBC
I:IV

Chapter Notes

There are lines from the show forthcoming; 1x10, "Fire and Blood," and 2x01, "the North Remembers." I've also completely altered the timeline - all you need to know is that Catelyn has already brokered the deal with the Freys to be married to Robb, Arya, and Bran, and that Robb has already sent Theon to his father, all before they crossed the Twins and entered into the Riverlands. All military victories Robb has had since are on "the Young Wolf."

The Winter Witch IV

It took Harry three days to realize Hermione was missing.

The first day - when McGonagall owled him saying that she sent Hermione to the Forbidden Forest to find the Centaur clan and treat with them and that she never came back in time for dinner - didn't worry Harry too much. Hermione probably met up with the Centaurs, and, like always, asked them some question and they went on and on and on about the stars and she couldn't politely get away.

(He ignored that she always hated Divination.)

On the second day, just after dinner, McGonagall owled again, saying Hermione still wasn't back. Harry felt a trickle of alarm, but nothing so dire; sometimes she disappeared for moments to herself - as she often had when they were students and ended up in the library for hours upon hours, or later in the library at Grimmauld Place - so that's where Harry was sure she was.

(McGonagall had the castle searched and even the House Elves, who didn't like Hermione much, couldn't find her. Anywhere. Even in the famous Chamber of Secrets.)

So, on the third day, just after dinner at eight o'clock in the evening, McGonagall Floo'ed Harry at the Weasley's, and said, in a very crisp voice, "Miss Granger has not been in the castle, Mr. Potter, nor can anyone find her. We will be conducting a search for her immediately."

Then, the panic set in.

The entire Weasley family roused from their lounging after Molly's delicious meal, and Harry and Ron, frantic, Apparated to the Hogwarts gates with embarrassingly loud cracks. Harry, barely able to hold onto his DA coin with numb fingers, had to hand it over to Ginny, who spelled it with the simple message: SOS HOGWARTS. HG MISSING. COME NOW.

Neville and Luna appeared almost immediately, Hannah Abbott on Neville's arm, matching blushes on their faces and their robe buttons just as unevenly paired up. Within the hour, George had managed to contact Lee and Angelina and Alicia; somehow, in that conversation, Seamus had been notified, as well as the Patil twins, and from there the rest of Dumbledore's Army began popping in and walking towards the gate from the public Floo at the Three Broomstick's.

Then, with their wands held high and aloft and lit with a lumos, they began searching the castle
grounds while Harry went straight to the Forbidden Forest, Ron on his heels. Harry knew where he was going.

Ron looked around nervously and fingered his wand into a tighter grip, his knuckles turning white. He didn't have fond memories: between the flying Ford Anglia, the acronomantula, werewolves, and the final battle, he had enough of forests. However, he didn't know why they were in the forest and asked, "Is there a reason why we're going into the forest first, instead of searching the grounds with the others?"

Harry nodded, eyes firmly ahead. "I'm going to get the Resurrection Stone."

Ron halted immediately. "What?"

Harry glanced at him over his shoulder. "The Stone. I'm going to use it."

"T-to-" Ron gulped. "To see if Hermione answers?"

"No," denied Harry immediately. But then his shoulders slumped. "I dunno - maybe. Or at least ask for help from the dead."

"Hermione said that the Stone isn't a connection to the dead," said Ron quietly, walking again. "That it's like the Mirror of Erised."

Harry shrugged. "Could be. But I don't care."

"Should you be using a Hallow?" Ron asked again, after some moments of silence.

Harry shook his head. "No. But - but if it helps Hermione, then I'd happily become the Master of Death."

The two fell into companionable silence, their feet shuffling over fallen leaves and cracking on twigs until Harry felt they had reached where he prepared to meet Voldemort. Harry dropped into a low crouch, sweeping his holly wand back and forth across the dewy grass, and then - there was a glint of light further ahead, just to the right, and carefully, Harry picked up the stone.

Ron's intake of breath was the only sign he saw Harry had found the Hallow, and was staring at it in the flat palm of his hand. "Will it still work?" he finally asked.

Harry slowly nodded, and turned the stone three times, thinking, Hermione Granger.

No spectre appeared, and after a few tense seconds, both men exhaled loudly.

"Not dead then," said Ron with a shaky laugh, running a hand through his red hair, making it stick up. "Who will you call now?"

Harry's face twisted. "Dumbledore, I guess."

So he turned the stone again, and almost immediately, a ghostly, pale shadow appeared before Harry, taking in his surroundings.

"Harry," greeted Dumbledore, a genial smile on his face, and a twinkle in his eyes still present. "I am surprised - yet happy - to be called to you."

"It's good to see you, sir," replied Harry, and Ron, at his side but unable to see the ghostly form of the late Headmaster, glanced this way and that. "I need your help."
Dumbledore folded his hands in front of him and nodded. "What can I help you with, my boy?"

"Hermione's missing, sir," said Harry, "And she's not dead; I already tried with the stone. But no
elves can find her, and she hasn't returned from the Forbidden Forest since three days ago when she
entered. No spells can find her either. It's like she's not on the planet!"

"Then there's your answer, Harry," replied Dumbledore calmly.

"What?" he replied, his jaw clenching shut. Of course Dumbledore had to speak in riddles!

"Miss Granger cannot be found because she is not on this planet," the late Headmaster explained
again.

Harry's sigh was just a shade beyond frustrated. "With all due respect, sir - while muggles have gone
to the moon, none have gone further and however ambitious Hermione can be, I don't think visiting
Mars was in her daily planner."

At his tone, Ron turned wide blue eyes on him and stared. "Another planet?"

"My boy," said Dumbledore, a tiny frown and furrow between his brows. "Has this world taught
you nothing? With magic, anything is possible."

Biting back an angry retort as his stomach clenched, Harry let the magic of the Resurrection Stone
go, and pocketed it into his front jean pocket, while Ron crossed his arms at his side.

Harry caught his eyes and shook his head. "He thinks she's not on Earth."

"He's bonkers."

"Absolutely," agreed Harry, and they turned, facing Hogwarts and ready to rejoin the rest of the
search party. "But when is he not? And - well, he does have a point."

"A point?" echoed Ron incredulously.

"Well, if she's not dead; and not anywhere here-" Harry trailed off. "Then where is she?"

Ron stared at him a bit longer before aborting a snort of laughter. "Probably terrorizing someone into
using the library."

A grin twisted on Harry's face. "Yeah."

"Sides," continued Ron, significantly more cheerful, "This is Hermione, we're talking about! She's
brilliant, but scary. And if she accidentally found herself on another planet, she'd find a way back."

They stopped at the edge of the forest, looking out at the twinkling lights of the castle they both grew
up in, the distant shouts of people calling for their friend, and the bobbing lights of their wands.

"Another adventure?" asked Ron, mentally cataloguing who they could speak to and for what. "We
could ask Luna for some help. Make things easier for Hermione on our end of things."

Harry nodded, a hum of agreement slipping past his lips. "It was getting a bit dull…"

Hidden in the shadow of the forest, they took a moment to grin at each other.

Ron's grin then stretched into a smile. "I guess it was her turn to end up in a weird situation. And it's
not even Halloween, yet!"
Harry groaned, and they moved forward towards the Greenhouses, with Ron continuing their conversation, trailing off pensively, "To be fair though, I reckon we can wait on the death-defying adventures after this for a few years until it's my turn… or, at least until after Yule, don't you reckon? Mum always makes the best mince pies…"

The war room that Robb and his men used was a typical room from any castle; it reminded Hermione of a smaller version of the Great Hall from Hogwarts, long and rectangular but compact that it only held enough room for the main generals in his army and advisors. Torches flickered on the walls, and the dim room remained dim as the evening progressed. Some of the men had brought their goblets of mead and wine, and the smell of the alcohol as well as the heat from the roaring fire behind her, and the head of the table, nearly lulled Hermione into complacency.

As such, she missed quite a lot of the conversation around her.

From what been about the latest battle, going over mistakes made or maneuvers she had no interest in, Hermione was beginning to think that Karstark and Bolton hated her guts and this was a punishment. This was strategy; and while that was nothing bothersome in any regard, it was as interesting as listening to Ron talk Quidditch.

Then, Vyman brought in information about a Renly and Stannis Baratheon - Hermione perked up at the word, "stag," and fondly thought of Harry's patronus - and their idiotic claims for the same throne, despite one being the eldest surviving brother of the recently deceased King Robert.

_Honestly, it's not difficult, just give the next brother the throne, she thought sourly. Especially if Robb had a point about the Queen's children - hell, even that blond Malfoy man - erm, the Kingslayer? - didn't deny the fact that he had children with his sister. It seems pretty straight-forward to me._

Eventually, Jon Umber - the one who met Hermione in the clearing and brought her to Riverrun, and whom she later had come to realize was the Greatjon as he idiotically named his son _the same name as his and Junior wasn't a term anyone used_ - slammed his hand down on the table, rattling the goblets on it and silencing everyone.

"My lords. MY LORDS!" he shouted, catching their attention, Hermione included. "Here's what I say to these two kings!"

He hocked a large ball of spit in his mouth and then spat it to the ground at his side, making the men around him laugh and cheer. Hermione wrinkled her nose in disgust and glanced at her side, where Robb sat impassively, watching the men around him with an intelligent gleam.

"Renly Baratheon is nothing to me, nor Stannis neither. Why should they rule over me and mine from some flowery seat in the south? What do they know of the Wall or the Wolfswood? Even their gods are wrong. Why shouldn't we rule ourselves again?" each question the Greatjon bit out was met with nods or resounding agreement. The mood of the room had shifted. "It was the dragons we bowed to and now the dragons are dead."

He deliberately drew his sword from his scabbard and pointed it at Robb, at the head of the table. Hermione fingered her wand, carefully eyeing the large man. _He's like, nearly Hagrid's size. Would a stunner even take him down if he decides to make a move?_

But she glanced at Robb again and saw that he was sitting passively. Beside him, in between her and his master, his wolf, Grey Wind, was watching the Greatjon but made no move to intercept. The wolf did not think him a threat, and Hermione let her grip on her wand loosen.
"There sits the only King I mean to bend my knee to: the King in the North!"

Robb inhaled quietly, and his eyes flickered over at Hermione, who met them. She wasn't sure what she saw in those wide, blue eyes, and before she could read into them further, he quickly turned back to what was happening in front of him.

Karstark was nodding, stroking a part of his beard thoughtfully. His eyes moved from Robb, at the head of the table, to Hermione. She nearly shivered under the gaze, wondering if he was still thinking of betrothing her to one of his sons. There was something in his gaze, though, and when his eyes met hers, they crinkled up at the corner in friendliness.

Hermione was not put at ease.

"I'll have peace on those terms," he said loudly. "They can keep their red castle, and their iron chair too. We have something better: the Young Wolf." He then turned his eyes back at her. "And a Winter Witch."

Hermione blanched as Karstark drew his sword, and stepping back from the table and his seat, knelt, the sword in front of him with his hands on the hilt. Nearby, his sons fell to their knees, too. "The King in the North."

*Oh, no,* thought Hermione, eyes wide. *I didn't sign up for this.*

The Greatjon roared, "The King in the North!"

And then everyone else joined in, even his mother's Tully men, marginally connected to him by his mother's marriage into the North. They were all shouting, and drawing their swords. "The King in the North! The King in the North! THE KING IN THE NORTH!"

Eventually the shouting and cheer of declaring themselves independent wore down. Hermione, absolutely stunned, did herself to make herself as small as possible as her thoughts raced. *Was there paperwork involved or could anyone just annex themselves without prejudice?* Her eyes shrewdly took in the flushed faces and wondered if this were going to bite the Northern army in the arse later.

Beside her, Robb slowly stood, presenting a very different image to what she had normally seen him as: he stood tall and solemn, his blue eyes lingering on each of the men in the room to give them equal measure.

"My Lords," he said quietly, but his voice carried in the suddenly deathly silent room. "I thank you for the honour - and I thank you for the trust and belief you place in me as your leader and fellow Northman." He took a quick, deep breath, and said, in a clear and loud voice, "I accept; I will take on the responsibility as the King in the North."

And yet a wild, bitter part of Hermione's mind spoke up just then, casting a sour tinge on the rest of the evening: *You're not in the North anymore, Your Highness. Here be monsters.*

Immediately following his very quick coronation, plans were made to prepare to move to southwest, pushing the Lannister forces that were beginning to group under Tywin Lannister's orders back to their land.

Robb winced as a twinge of pain shot through his head at the multiple plans that were occurring at once; being in charge meant numerous engagements were happening amongst his men sworn to him, and as a King, now, he had to consider the most advantageous routes that would demonstrate success and that the Greatjon's belief in him was warranted.
Currently, Theon was north, at the Iron Islands of his home, hopefully convincing his father to join the Northern army. With Renly Baratheon backed entirely by Highgarden and the Tyrells, Robb had the thought of sending his mother south to ask Renly for an alliance; the youngest Baratheon son would occupy King's Landing and split the Lannister forces between defending their land and home, and protecting Tywin's grandchildren as well as daughter in the castle.

He then had the opportunity to push onward towards Casterly Rock and Lannisport, taking the Lannister seat from under their very noses - a feat that would rub salt in the wound of Tywin losing access to his abundant gold mines and source of income. It wouldn't replace the loss of his murdered father, but it was a start of taking everything from the Lannisters as they took everything from him.

But first - he had a prisoner to interrogate. And like his father always said: he who passes the sentence, swings the sword. He wasn't about to have someone else deal with Jaime Lannister when it was his duty.

Being dragged from the Whispering Woods, to Riverrun, and then left outside in a cage meant for Grey Wolf, surrounded by hostile enemies in the middle of their camp, had striped the proud Kingslayer to some degree. He was dirty, covered in muck and dried sweat, sitting on the muddy ground, all of which had caked onto his once resplendent golden armour. His blonde hair was mussed and grimy, almost greasy, from sweat and a lack of care.

However, his eyes remained defiant, and there was an obnoxious sneer on his face as Robb strode up to the cage, Grey Wind at his side.

"The King in the North," called out the Kingslayer, his voice barely holding back a tone of contempt. "I keep expecting you to leave me in one castle or another for safekeeping, but you drag me along from camp to camp. Have you grown fond of me, Stark? Is that it? Where's that strange witch? I want to thank her for her role in all this."

Robb clenched his hands into fists at his side, creaking the leather of his gloves as he did so. The words were direct and meant to infuriate him into making a mistake - and there was no way he'd want Hermione near the man. There was noise behind him, throughout the camp, but he put it to the back of his mind; there was always something going on in a war camp.

"If I left you with one of my bannermen, your father would know within a fortnight," said Robb evenly, bracing his legs and standing in the familiar pose he took when he met Hermione at Riverrun. "And my bannermen would receive a raven with a message: Release my son and you'll be rich beyond your dreams. Refuse, and your house'll be destroyed, root and stem."

There was a knowing look in Jaime's eyes. "If I left you with one of my bannermen, your father would know within a fortnight," said Robb evenly, bracing his legs and standing in the familiar pose he took when he met Hermione at Riverrun. "And my bannermen would receive a raven with a message: Release my son and you'll be rich beyond your dreams. Refuse, and your house'll be destroyed, root and stem."

There was a knowing look in Jaime's eyes. "You don't trust the loyalty of the men following you into battle?"

Robb bristled that the man thought he knew him. "Oh, I trust them with my life, just not with yours."

The gleam in the Kingslayer's eyes altered just slightly - Robb shivered as he realized it was increased wariness, or even respect, as the blond said, "Smart, boy."

Robb winced, and the other man saw it.

"What's wrong?" he jeered, "Don't like being called boy? Insulted?"

Annoyance flashed through Robb, roiling in his stomach and Grey Wolf began to pull back his lips, revealing pink gums and long, sharp white teeth. From there, the wolf edged around the cage, sniffing and huffing. The commotion became louder, but Robb was entirely focused on the man in
The Kingslayer’s eyes widened, minutely, but enough that Robb could tell he was wary and frightened. It gave Robb courage, and an idea, so he stepped forward to the door of the cage and released the latch, swinging the door wide open.

He narrowed his eyes on his captive. "You insult yourself, Kingslayer. You've been defeated by a boy. You're held captive by a boy. Perhaps you'll be killed by a boy."

Grey Wind, having completed his circuit around the large cage, slipped silently through the open door and inched forward, spit and drool foaming his mouth and dripping. Robb knew the size of the direwolf - that of a small warhorse - was intimidating to anyone who had never seen such a creature before; but having a direwolf in front of you, growling, with its hot breath wafting across yours? It was psychological torture.

The commotion grew louder, until the one voice Robb didn't want to hear at this particular time spoke loudly.

"What in Merlin's name is this?"

His head swung around, but not quick enough to not see the satisfaction and malice that sparkled in the blue eyes of the Kingslayer.

Lady Hermione stood before him, with Dacey on one side and Torrhen on the other; both looked uncomfortable, their eyes darting between the witch and their newly-named King. She wore her usual clothes - some strange trouser and shirt combination and nothing anyone suggested otherwise would have her change - and looked utterly out of place, beyond that of a woman in the camp. She looked otherworldly.

"Ah - Lady Hermione," began Robb, glancing at Torrhen and Dacey, before turning his eyes back to her. "Um - would you care to maybe-?"

"Why's he in a cage?" she continued speaking, aghast. "And dirty?"

"Because he's a prisoner," said Dacey coolly, drawing the group's attention.

"And?" the witch asked, crossing her arms and tilting her chin up in a clear challenging move. "What? You don't have something similar to the Geneva Convention here? No rules of POWs is it? Fine - I get it. Different world, different rules."

"But is it that hard to show some compassion to a prisoner?" she eyed the Lannister beadily. "And I'm guessing he's of some value, right? So by showing you're the better person and treating him well would only reflect better on you as people, and your army and cause, too."

The Kingslayer chuckled. "You heard the witch, boy. Send me to a castle and a nice featherbed. I'll take a cup of wine and wench, too."

Robb whirled around with a snarl. "Stannis Baratheon sent ravens to all the High Lords of Westeros. The King Joffrey Baratheon is neither a true King, nor a true Baratheon. He's your bastard son! You deserve nothing! You will receive nothing from me!"

"Well, if that's true, Stannis is the rightful King," the blond man said, curling his own lips in a parody

Undaunted, Robb thrust his arm out in front of him, a finger pointing and shaking in rage at the Kingslayer. "My father learned the truth. That's why you had him executed!"

"I did not kill Eddard Stark," said Jaime Lannister lowly, his voice dark at his impugned honour.

But Robb was not listening - he continued shouting, wanting his thoughts off his chest; wanting Hermione to hear the ugly truth and not defend the man. "Your son killed him so the world wouldn't learn who fathered him and you... you pushed my brother from a window because he saw you with the Queen!"

He blond tilted his head back, leaning it against the spike wedged into the ground behind him that he was cuffed to. His eyebrows rose in challenge. "You have proof? Or, do you want to trade gossip like a couple of fishwives?"

A wordless cry burst from Robb's mouth and he turned his back on the man, his eyes meeting Hermione's. His anger was still high and he found himself shouting at her, his right arm outstretched and gesturing with sharp slashes and punctured with jabs as he spoke.

"This?! This is the man you defend? A man who tried to kill you - who does not deny what he did with his own sister! What he did to my father! What he took-!"

Hermione was watching him, her amber eyes bright but steady. She walked forward and gently, carefully, put her hand on his outstretched arm.

He stilled.

She looked up, met his eyes, and pressed very gently down on his arm.

"By his own admission, he's guilty of incest," said Hermione quietly, her voice carrying only far enough for him to hear. "And he's guilty of assault on your father, of some degree; and on your brother, if what you're saying is true. He's guilty of a lot of things, Robb."

He exhaled shakily, bringing his arm down and to his side.

"But you're not," she finished, her lips quirking into a tiny little smile. "Don't be guilty - of doing the wrong thing for the right reason. Clean him up; put him in a room with guards. I'll add to it, drawing an age line and some containment fields so no one who isn't supposed go in, does; and so that he can't get out. But do better than him. Be better than him."

Robb took a deep breath, in and then exhaled, and then repeated it. Hermione kept her brightly lit amber eyes on his, and then slowly, he felt the rolling anger in his stomach settle and retreat, turning more into a calming balm. He nodded, acknowledging her help, and stepped back.

He turned to face the Kingslayer, who was watching him and Lady Hermione peculiarly. "I'm sending one of your cousins down to King's Landing with my peace terms."

"You think my father is going to negotiate with you?" he asked incredulously. He shook his head. "You don't know him very well."

"No, but he's starting to know me," said Robb quietly.

The Kingslayer frowned at him. "Three victories don't make you a conqueror."
The grin Robb sent him was decidedly wolf-like. "It's better than three defeats, don't you think?"

She took a gamble in challenging him, especially in front of two of his men - well, so to speak, Dacey wasn't a man - and in front of his enemy. That could've backfired spectacularly, and Hermione wasn't too keen on being intimately acquainted with a dungeon. But sometimes - sometimes - when she felt strongly about something, her mouth just ran ahead of her brain, which was going miles per second, and seeing the Kingslayer (honestly, what's his name?) on the dirty ground and being toyed with by Grey Wolf made her shudder.

It wasn't like S.P.E.W. again, no; it was about dignity, and being better that their enemies. The Order never tortured anyone, and she knew what it was like to be looked down as lesser. She didn't want Robb and his men to be thought of the same way, even if it was a different world with different rules.

So, there she was: silently trailing behind Robb with a frowning Torrhen and Dacey at either elbow, while a collection of guards were around the Kingslayer, eyes firmly fixed on the man as they led him through the corridors of Riverrun.

Hermione lingered outside of the room while Robb and Grey Wind stood in the doorway when the blond enemy was eventually thrown into a guest room, one with a bed that was stripped of its sheets. The guards around him began to declutter the room of anything that could be used as a weapon: vases, tapestries, rugs, statues. By the time they were done, it was barren: a bed frame with feather mattress and little else.

A huge tub was then brought and the man was given no dignity or privacy as women filled it with bucket after bucket of boiling water. When the guards all stepped forward to strip the man of his armour and clothes, into the eager hands of maids nearby to wash them, Hermione turned her back, although both Dacey and Torrhen faced forward to watch her and watch their King and his enemy.

Eventually, the blond hair gleamed again, and the dirt (and smell) dissipated from the Kingslayer and he was shoved back into the now clean shirt and trousers he had on under his armour. Manacles fastened around his wrists and a chain connected them to the ones around his ankles. The man would not be going anywhere.

At one point, Hermione watched as Robb opened his mouth, wanting to say something as he surveyed the man in front of him; but he stopped himself, shook his head and left the room. As he stepped through the door, he motioned for Hermione to follow, and she did, albeit, nervously.

"Is this it? Will he tell me off for what I did and 'off with her head' me?" she wondered, wringing her hands in front of her.

They entered a room she hadn't been in before (not like she knew every room at Riverrun, the place was huge and she spent the majority of her time in her assigned bedroom or the library; earlier today had been an attempt to tour the holdfast) while Dacey and Torrhen stood outside.

The room was small, but had three large windows with thick glass overlooking the moat and split point of the river that flowed around Riverrun. There was a large desk and several chairs and even a smaller table for meals near a fireplace. Maps hung from the walls, and there were scrolls and books and loose parchment in neat piles on the desk. It was missing a computer, and a potted plant, but Hermione recognized an office when she saw it.

Grey Wind circled around a few times in front of the fire, on the plush rug, and then promptly curled up.
Robb went to stand behind the desk, looking out the window and presented his back to Hermione.

They fell into silence.

Hermione fidgeted where she stood, tension tightening her frame. Her stomach quivered and she felt nauseous. The longer Robb was quiet, the worse her anxiety became.

*I have lived and fought through battles, faced Death Eaters, and was tortured near to insanity but prevailed,* she thought mulishly as the silence also began to increase her ire. *I won't break with psychological mind games.*

"You spoke of doing the wrong thing for the right reason," the new King said, not turning to face her, but his voice suddenly breaking the silence made her jump. "It sounded as though you had experience in this…?"

Hermione scowled. *Now he wanted answers?* She moved to one of the chairs in front of the desk and sat in it, bringing a hand up to chew at the corner of a nail. "My Headmaster, although I've changed some of what said. In my fourth year, there was a tournament and a boy died. He was murdered. And at one point, Professor Dumbledore said to a politician, 'we must all do what is right, instead of what is easy.' Because the politician was going to do what was easy - by ignoring that the boy was murdered."

Hermione sighed and Robb turned his body slightly to look at her, but kept his feet in front of the window. So, she continued, quietly, "It led to war. And Professor Dumbledore kept things - kept terrible things from us all that could've maybe helped us win the war earlier. Or not - I'm not sure. But what he did was the wrong thing, as it made my best friend walk to his death, willingly, knowingly. Harry had to do it, so it was the right thing to do because the situation helped us win the way, but it was for the wrong reasons."

"You think my treatment of the Kingslayer was wrong?" he asked, quietly.

Hermione shrugged, taking her hand away from her mouth. "Wasn't it?"

Their eyes met; Robb was looking at her strangely, and in a way, Hermione found she missed the bumbling teenager who wasn't quite sure what to say to her in that moment; *this* was a King.

"We're going to be moving out soon," said Robb instead, turning around to face her, gesturing to a nearby map as he spoke. "We're going to push for Lannisport and Casterly Rock. Jaime Lannister will remain here, under guard. Anything you can add to the room to keep him imprisoned, with your magic, would be appreciated."

Hermione bobbed a nod. He was letting her use the library, so… a few non-invasive spells was a fair trade.

Robb turned back to the map, and sighed. "I'll probably have to split my forces, leave some behind. There is talk of Tywin Lannister pulling his army out from King's Landing to come north, to aid his son. I'll need someone to remain to engage him in battle - but... I feel uncomfortable without managing the campaign myself."

Hermione grinned, standing and looking at the taller man, who flushed lightly under her eyes. "Like being in control, do you?"

His returning grin was sheepish. "Yes."

He turned back to the map and pointed at several trails and roads that led south and west. "I'm
thinking of leaving my Uncle Edmure behind - he's capable, but this is his home. He'll be more likely to be fierce to defend it."

Hermione snorted, and a plan began to form.

*What about -? Could I do that? Help them like that?* she thought, frowning. In one sense, she had thrown her lot in with the Northern army and Robb Stark, when Jaime Lannister had tried to cut her down when she left their fight in the clearing of the Whispering Wood; and there she was now, in Robb's study, listening to him make plans to fight another.

"You know," she began conversationally, drawing the taller King's attention, "In our fifth year, we had this *terrible* Defense professor. Harry ended up creating this secret club that taught practical defense, but since we couldn't speak about it, we needed a way to convey our meeting times and locations."

"A necessary precaution," agreed Robb, confused, but listening.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, exactly. So I took a gold coin, charmed to look like real money, and spelled it so that anything that happened to the master coin reflected on all the other coins."

Robb blinked, understanding spreading across his face. His eyes darted quickly to hers, an urgent but hopeful look building as he reached forward and grasped her upper arms.

"You could do this…? For us? For *me*?" he asked breathlessly. "I could communicate with my Lords?"

"Instantaneously," replied Hermione, looking up to the young man who was taller than her by a few inches. "Across any distance." She frowned, her eyes turning inward as she began to mutter plans. "I don't think I'd use coins again, though, you could barely fit anything on them. Maybe parchment? I wonder if I could also manage to spell a quill so that it's self inking…?"

Robb then laughed, loudly, jarring her. There was something in his eyes when he looked at her. "You, Lady Hermione - are truly something else. Thank you."

She was missing something, here - he was speaking one thing but his body was saying something different and she wasn't sure what it was, or even if she wanted to know.

But one thing was for sure: she was committed to another war if she wanted to continue using the library to get home. And until she exhausted all options at Riverrun, she would remain, and in response, honour her host by helping him where she could.

*Gryffindor my arse,* she thought as Robb began to speak happily about how the parchment she could spell would help them perfect their battle plans. *The longer I'm here, the more I turn into a Hufflepuff. Still…*

She looked at the young man, all auburn hair and bright blue eyes, gesturing animatedly with flushed cheeks and an easy smile, even if she didn't take in his words.

*There are worse places I could be.*
I done goofed. Bolton was supposed to be leading a separate force south towards Harrenhal, and therefore he could not have appeared at the Battle of the Whispering Wood when Robb first met Hermione, nor did he have time to return to Riverrun in the few days between the first meeting and him joining Robb to ask for Hermione to join him. So, instead, I put Robett Glover in his place; he returned to Riverrun a week later in time for Robb's coronation. All you need to know, he's an old white dude with a feud with the Umbers.

The Winter Witch V

Robb nervously stood in front of his Lords and Lady Mormont, having called them to a war meeting before he left to Oxcross in the morning. It was late, and many were eager to retire to bed - but he needed them to be here for Hermione's game-changing addition, and for them to practice using the parchments to be confident and comfortable whilst in battle.

"Well, we're all here now," grumbled Greatjon. "What's this about, Your Highness?"

Robb glanced at Hermione, who stood at his side. In her arms were several bundles of loose parchment, and a box full of what she called "self-inking quills." She was shorter than him, but her presence felt so much larger than often times, he felt so unsure around her. This was one of those times he was unsure of what he could say or do to convince his Lords, especially as magic was far from his understanding.

"Lady Hermione brought to my attention something that could aid us while we are out in battle," began Robb cautiously, looking around the rectangular table. There was some skepticism of course; with the exception of Roose Bolton, the Greatjon, and Karstark, and Robb's own personal guard of Daryn Hornwood, Eddard and Torrhen Karstark, or Dacey Mormont, the rest of the Northern lords only had conjecture and rumours of Hermione's powers.

"But first: does anyone here know what Lady Hermione and I are to speak to you about?" asked Robb, meeting the eyes of his Lords and Lady Maege Mormont. Once they all shook their heads, he continued, "Thank you. Lady Hermione will be distributing pieces of parchment to all of you to take with you into battle."

"If we're to send a raven, My Lord," began Wendel Manderly, a round, robust man with a head full of auburn hair and a neatly-trimmed beard but an impressive moustache atop his lips, "the Maesters with us will have parchment."

Robb nodded. "Yes - of course, but these… are different. Lady Hermione has used her magic on them."

"For what purpose?" asked Maege Mormont, a large older woman with thick brown hair, frowning. In response, Robb turned to Hermione and let her step forward. She placed her armload down on the
tabletop, spreading out the parchment and leaving the box of quills open. She took a deep breath, and then squared her shoulders, thrusting them back as she boldly met the eyes of his Lords around the table.

"This parchment is connected to all the others," she said, punctuating her words quickly and enunciating them sharply. "What is written on one will appear on all, instantaneously, anywhere you are in Westeros." She paused. "I think, anyway. I haven't had time to check the distance."

A few of the lords began to mutter, so Robb cleared his throat. "Would someone like to volunteer?"

"With what?" asked Karstark, his eyes moving from the parchment, to Hermione, to Robb, in a circular motion.

Robb smiled, but it was akin to baring his teeth at the man who had offered his sons to Hermione for marriage; even now, the thought didn't sit well with him and he happily indulged in his spiteful side. "Lord Karstark, wonderful! If you could take one of the pieces of parchment and leave the room?"

The man stiffened, the lines in his face deepening as he tried to figure out whether he was being singled out for insult, or honour. However, he strode forward, and with a nod to Lady Hermione, took one of the parchments and left the room.

She turned to him, her amber eyes wide and bright, reflecting the reds and oranges of the fire behind them. Robb did as they had arranged earlier, when she tested the parchment with him in his study. He reached into the box of her self-inking quills, and to the amazement of his northmen, immediately put the quill to paper without dipping it into an inkwell. Black ink spread across the parchment.

*Does this satisfy your curiosity, Lord Karstark?* he wrote in his scrawl, and then held it up for people to read. A few squinted, the ones in the back, but the closest ones began to murmur. Then, he wrote another line: *You can return to the room.*

Seconds later, Karstark stormed back into the war room, his eyes feverishly bright and shouted, "I WANT THREE OF THESE!"

Beside him, Hermione preened as the murmurs grew in noise.

Groups broke up then; a few meandered towards Hermione, who took the parchment Robb had and was demonstrating with a crowd, with Karstark's lying side-by-side near the far end of the table, each giddy with the implications.

Bolton and Karstark, however, stood near Robb along with Greatjon, Lord Mallister, Lord Halys Hornwood, and Lord Robett Glover.

"Quite the ingenious idea, Your Majesty," said Karstark, the white of his beard trembling under his jaw as it moved when he spoke.

Robb turned his head slightly towards the man, all the while keeping Hermione in his sight as she enthusiastically waved one of the self-inking quills around. "It was Lady Hermione's idea, my Lord."

Above his head, Bolton, Karstark, and the Greatjon shared a looked. Lord Mallister, a Riverlands Lord sworn to Robb's mother's family, as well as his Northern lords, Hornwood and Glover frowned.

"Are we sure it is wise to trust this witch?" asked Glover in a low voice.

"You think her parchments and quills will ensnare and bewitch us?" jeered Greatjon, eyeing the man
that his family had a minor feud with, his lip curled back.

"She's a witch," protested the other Lord, spitting out the words. His eyes were dark in the flickering light of the fireplace and torches on the walls. "Who knows what they are capable of?"

Robb nearly recoiled at the venom in the man's voice, blinking in surprise. Lady Hermione has given us something that will aid us in battle - more secure than any raven, and something that we can use to our advantage over our enemies. How is this something bad? His eyes narrowed on the man, and Lord Glover, sensing the shifting mood of those around him, especially three who had seen the witch's abilities previously and liked her, cleared his throat.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," smoothly replied Glover, although still ill at ease and he shifted from foot to foot. "I meant no disrespect."

Robb's eyes remained on the man, and he finally, slowly, imperiously, nodded. "Granted."

The man disappeared from their small cluster, winding his way around the crowded war room until his form was enveloped by some other lords.

There was a low scoff from someone who remained by Robb's side. Then, he heard, in a low voice, Karstark caution, "He will make things difficult."

*For you, Robb heard. For showing favour to Lady Hermione.*

Robb frowned, and thought, *I know.*

Hermione was never left behind, before.

It was a rule - an unspoken one - in all her years at Hogwarts by Harry and Ron's sides, from the moment she invited herself along with them and Neville, and nearly dying due to their midnight romp to the Forbidden Floor and Fluffy - *Hermione was never left behind.*

So it was decidedly odd to stand next to Lady Stark, who stood stiffly as they, along with Maester Vyman and several Tully bannermen including Edmure remained behind, watching the long line of the royal procession ride one by one out of the gates.

Robb ought to have been one of the first through, but he lingered with Dacey, Eddard and Daryn at his side, along with his Great-Uncle, the Blackfish. His horse was prancing in its spot, eager to move along, and Grey Wind was sniffing the air, his tongue lolling out of the corner of his mouth in anticipation.

His eyes were on his uncle, solemnly appraising him and saying, in his kingly voice, "Hold Riverrun, Uncle."

Edmure, although he had the same hair and eyes as his nephew, had such a different expression on his face that Hermione nearly snorted out loud. His long face went shallow and pale, and his Adam's apple bobbed thickly in his throat as he nodded.

*Weight on your shoulders,* thought Hermione, eyeing him curiously, and a smidge of pity. *He was like a first-year Neville. One day you'd be Lord Tully, of Riverrun, but for someone who is in his thirties, you're nowhere ready for this and what's to come.*

Then, Robb's eyes were on the tall, broad-shouldered man at Hermione's side - just behind her. "You'll watch over her?" he asked, his voice friendlier, but still as fierce as when speaking to his
uncle.

Hermione scowled, disliking the implied sexism. "I can take care of myself, thankyouverymuch."

Robb ignored her and kept staring at the man. Torrhen shifted, his eyes glancing between the irate witch and his King. "Erm. Yes. Your Majesty."

Robb's eyes narrowed some more but Hermione sighed loudly and crossed her arms across her sweater. "Honestly, Robb, don't you have somewhere to be?"

Beside her, Catelyn - Lady Stark - inhaled sharply and muttered, "Lady Hermione - this is your King - don't disrespect-!"

Hermione grit her teeth and resolved to speak to Robb's mother shortly to find out why the woman disliked her. "Not my King," she muttered in response, and then smiled brightly at the woman.

Robb, who had heard the exchange, stifled a grin. "Keep that spirit, Lady Hermione! It won't be long that we'll be gone, I think - Oxcross is not more than a week's ride, and Ashemark little more than a few days from it. The parchment you've charmed for us will ensure that the castle is well-defended."

"I have no worries about that," said Hermione, mentally thinking, *I can always add protection wards and proximity alerts, as well as Muggle Repellant wards if I must.*

Robb grinned at Hermione and Hermione smiled back. The sun glinted off his auburn hair - a much deeper and darker red than Ron's orange had ever been - and the corner of his blue eyes crinkled up.

Their eyes held for a moment, and then he wheeled his horse around and was galloping across the grey flagstone of Riverrun, his personal guard (now the Kingsguard) charging after him. There was a whoop and a laugh and then they passed through the main gate, and were gone.

Silence descended on those who remained.

Eventually, Catelyn Stark sighed and turned around, back into her childhood castle, with Maester Vyman on her heels, mumbling about ravens and letters. Edmure followed behind as well, a pensive frown on his face as he realized that Robb left him in charge of the castle and riverlands defense. Hermione stood a bit longer in the afternoon sun, tilting her head back and looking up at the fluffy clouds. The air was nippy, a winter chill already in the air. It wasn't as cool as autumns in Scotland at Hogwarts, but it was enough that Hermione's sweater barely kept her warm.

"My lady?" inquired Torrhen quietly. "Shall we go inside?"

Hermione turned on her sneaker, and followed the tall, broad-shouldered and brown-haired Karstark inside the hold. She had a library to read her way through.

For the next week, Hermione spent her time in Riverrun's library except for when she slept (which was in the assigned room she was given, but with her tent set up in the living area of the room, so she continued to sleep in there), and for when she ate (which was one meal a day, when Torrhen found her and dragged her out of the library to socialize at dinner in the Great Hall with those who remained at Riverrun).

The library at Riverrun was vast, full of knowledge and lore, some mundane and others, arcane. Hermione learned quite a bit about the Great Houses of Westeros, as they were called; about the Tullys of Riverrun, the Starks of Winterfell, the Lannisters of Casterly Rock, the Arryns of the Vale, the Martells of the Water Palace in Dorne, the Greyjoys of the Pike in the Iron Islands, and the
Tyrells of Highgarden. There were the near extinct Baratheons of the Stormlands, the family that had the throne last and lost it - along with the accusations of incest and therefore, illegitimate claims to the throne without the King's bloodline on its seat - and then the minor Houses and Lords that served under the Great Houses.

She learned about the Targaryens and where they came from - a place called Valyria in Essos that suffered some cataclysmic event (Hermione was certain it was a mass eruption of several volcanoes in the area), that not only destroyed the prominent houses there, but also destroyed many of the dragons from the area, as well.

_Dragons_, she grimaced, thinking back to the TriWizard Tournament as well as her daring Gringotts escape just a year previous. _And these aren't the Norberta kind, either._

No, the books in the Tully library wrote about giant, fearsome beasts that were only controlled by their Targaryen masters, commands shouted in High Valyrian, a language Hermione was beginning to learn as she translated portions of scrolls and scraps. These dragons weren't cute little green-ridged Norwegian Ridgebacks or the deep, ruby red of the Chinese Fireball.

These dragons were dangerous.

And, apparently, one of the last Targaryens - a young woman name Daenerys, the same age or just a bit younger than her and Robb - was rumoured to have three. _Three_ dragons under her dubious command, Hermione learned, from gossip spread in the Great Hall one of the evenings.

("But what does that mean?" she asked Torrhen.

He shrugged. "It means that I pray to the Old Gods she doesn't come to Westeros anytime soon. People remember her father, and they remember Harrenhal.")

So she looked them up: Mad Aerys Targaryen, who brutally murdered and tortured his subjects, including Robb's uncle and grandfather barely two decades previous; whose father went to war with Robert Baratheon to avenge his aunt Lyanna Stark. A whole country thrown into chaos and a new regime installed after it was all over.

She looked up Aerys' obsession with dragonfire - green wildfire so similar to Fiendfyre that Hermione was certain that there were magic users of her kind somewhere on the planet, at some time - and shivered in disgust and fear.

And then she read about Harrenhal.

The great castle in the south, not too far from them in Riverrun. And during the Conquest, when the first Targaryens came to Westeros, it burned under dragonfire. From what the text said, Hermione gathered the great castle was never truly rebuilt to its former glory under the Targaryen rule, because melted and blackened stone were descriptors from the recent Tourney - the one where Aerys Targaryen's son and heir crowned Lyanna Stark his Queen of Love and Beauty, and began the whole mess.

Delving into the history of Westeros was enjoyable, and far more interesting than anything Binns could have presented on the Goblin Wars of this-and-this year. But there was a lot _not_ said in the texts Hermione read: how far did Essos actually go? How south did the Sothoryos actually go? How many Islands were there? What was Ulthos - an Island or Continent? How much land was there beyond the Wall, and what kind of name was "the Land of Always Winter"? How could it be _Always Winter_?
The more she read, the more Hermione was convinced that the people of this planet were either not intellectually curious or terra incognita worked into the fantastical structure of maintaining the status quo for many of those in charge. Anyone who explored these uncharted territories disappeared; there was not much incentive to send more people out to discover the *whys* and *hows* of this world.

And without that information, Hermione was - potentially - stuck.

She needed coordinates, similar to longitude and latitude, to plug into her Arthimacy equation. But they had to be exact - she needed to know the size of the planet, its orbit around its sun, how many other celestial bodies there were around (asteroid belts, gas giants, and whatever else) to pinpoint the galaxy she was in, or near enough.

She needed to know and discover how magic worked in this strange, new world: they clearly had magic, with dragons and giants. There were spells and magical weapons, but it was so shrouded in mystery and hyperbole, Hermione wasn't sure what was real and what was made up.

Dacey had told her it would take years to gather the information she might need to go home, and Hermione was beginning to think the other woman was right.

So, despondently, Hermione decided against remaining in the library a week later after Robb and his men left for Oxcross, and wandered Riverrun, peeking in rooms and generally nosing about.

She passed one of the partially open doors when a rough, frustrated sigh caught her attention. There were two guards in Tully blue standing outside of it, but they were 1) ornamental, she was coming to realize; and 2) didn't stop her as she stepped up the door and knocked on the heavy wood.

The room was an office, similar to Robb's that they spoke in, but it had a different view and was *far* messier. There were torches on the walls, flickering, and others on flat surfaces around the room: the desk, the side tables, all to give more light in the fading afternoon sunlight.

By the desk, eyes bloodshot with dark bags under them, sat Edmure Tully, his hair as messy as Harry's. He was slouched, elbows on the table and his head in his hands as he looked at the desk - at some paper, but looked up at her knock.

"Lady Hermione," he said, struggling to rise. "How may I help you?"

Hermione stepped into the room with the implicit permission, and sat herself primly in the chair in front of his desk, curiously looking at the parchment and scrolls. As she sat, he did too.

"You look exhausted," she said instead, peering at him. "Are you okay?"

Edmure grimaced. "It's nothing."

She raised her eyebrows in response, and he sighed. There was a drawn look to his face, and underneath it all, she saw how pale he was.

*He's ill prepared to be Lord Tully, she thought. Why hadn't he been trained or taught this role?*

"May I ask you something?" she tentatively asked, leaning a bit forward.

Edmure nodded.

"I understand that in Westeros there are Great Houses - and Tully is one of them - which means you have a lot of responsibility," she began, wondering how to breach such a topic without offense, "What kind of training does someone who is an heir to a Great House receive? We have nothing like
Edmure leaned back in his seat, the leather underneath him creaking a bit. He looked a bit pleased at the distraction of speaking with her, and took her question seriously. "Well, each House does it differently. I had specific lessons with Maester Vyman, and my father, Lord Hoster Tully, taught me others years ago."

"So, you shadowed your father?" clarified Hermione.

"Shadowed?" echoed Edmure.

Hermione nodded. "Followed him around to meetings, was asked scenario questions on how to handle specific things, was given more and more responsibility as you got older…? That's how CEOs do it, I suppose."

"C.E.O.?" repeated Edmure, confusion lacing his voice as he said each letter individually with precision. He shook his head. "Ah, no - my father was very much still in command of the everyday in Riverrun. And when he fell ill, many of those duties fell to my Uncle, the Blackfish, as he has the experience."

Hermione made a face. "Then how are you supposed to gain the experience? Trial by fire?"

Edmure looked at her sharply. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, sorry!" Hermione hastily backpedalled after the poor turn of phrase. "It means being thrown into a situation and then having to learn on the go."

Edmure relaxed. "Ah, well. Then - yes." He waved a hand around the room with a grimace on his face. "This is my - 'trial by fire,' as you call it."

"Running Riverrun?" asked Hermione, sitting back in the chair and crossing one jean-clad leg over the other.

He nodded. "And an order from Robb."

Hermione perked up. "He's using the parchment?"

Edmure paused, looking at her, but then wordlessly handed her one of the many pieces on his desk, and Hermione, touched by his sharing of the military communique. On the linked parchment, in Robb's handwritten scrawl, were several orders. Each order began with the person's name, and then a list of duties. Edmure's read *Hold Riverrun. Tywin Lannister is preparing to leave Harrenhal and make for you.*

"What does this mean?"

Edmure tilted his head and nodded at the parchment as Hermione handed it back. "It means Riverrun will be going to war, shortly. Scouts spotted the Lannister forces over a week's ride away, and I've already given orders to prepare to leave tomorrow."

"Where are you going?" asked Hermione, frowning, "Didn't Robb say to hold Riverrun?"

"That would suggest a siege," replied Edmure, looking at a map hanging on the far wall, "And while Riverrun could easily hold it, the Fords is a better place for a battle as it stops the Lannister from coming further into the riverlands. It stops him from attacking villages along the way."
Hermione turned in the seat to look at the map as well. She stood and then crossed to it, her eyes finding Riverrun easily after spending so many time at it and staring at known maps of Westeros, Essos, and beyond. She traced the direction of Harrenhal north-west to Riverrun, finding the Ford Edmure was talking about nearby but more towards the halfway mark between the two castles. Oxcross, where Robb was currently, was beyond them, behind a mountain range.

"What did Robb write specifically?" she asked, without turning back to Edmure, her eyes narrowed.

"Ah," replied Edmure, and she heard shuffling papers. "He said, 'Hold Riverrun.'"

Hermione turned around. "That's awfully specific, don't you think?"

"Specific?" repeated Edmure, wrinkles appearing between his eyebrows.

Hermione nodded. "'Hold Riverrun.' Not, engage Tywin Lannister in battle. Not, prepare for battle at the Fords. Hold."

Edmure's wrinkles deepened as he looked down at his desk. "He… wants Tywin Lannister to engage with us."

"Yes," agreed Hermione, turning partially back to the map and pointing her finger closer to Riverrun. "But here - to draw him in."

"But why?"

Hermione shrugged. "My battles were fought as skirmishes, quick and dirty and often over within minutes. The longest battle I was in took place over a single day, and our enemy even gave us time to collect our wounded and dead, although that was more a psychological tactic to demoralize us."

"Demoralize," muttered Edmure, coming around the desk to stand by Hermione and look at the map. His eyes moved from Harrenhal to Riverrun, along the Red Fork, to Fairmarket to the north, and Acorn Hall to the south. "I can't have the Lannister forces reach Riverrun - we were just besieged by the Kingslayer. We could persevere until Robb returns, but…"

His eyes moved back to Harrenhal. "...but we don't want Tywin too close to Harrenhal either that he can retreat."

"What about a feint?"

"A feint?" repeated Edmure, and a flash of annoyance, of constantly repeating Hermione, crossed his face.

She shrugged. "Present a smaller force closer to Harrenhal, with the rest of the actual army further back. Pretend to be decimated in battle for a strategic retreat. Lure him in."

Edmure blinked in surprise. "And then?"

"Smash him," she said. "From everything I've heard of this man, he's smart. He's cunning. But he's also sure in his power and strength, so he has ego. He'll be rightfully cautious about Robb - he did manage to capture his heir - but you're an unknown."

Edmure looked pleased by Hermione's words, looking back at the map, clearly thinking. "Yes," he murmured, "Yes, I think that can work."

Hermione smiled brightly. "Great! When do we leave?"
Edmure said "no."

Torrhen refused her, as well.

Maester Vyman looked at her like she was crazy.

Hermione scoffed. It wasn't like there weren't women in Robb's army - the Mormont women were strong warriors! And she had a wand! Besides, she wasn't going to be leading the charge - that would've been too Light Brigade for her. She was happy to remain behind at a command tent, monitoring the parchment communications and then lending a hand with the wounded soldiers.

"The battlefield is not the place for you, Lady Hermione," argued Edmure feverently. They were standing in the same inner courtyard where Robb had said his goodbyes, Edmure's Tully force ready to exit through the main gate. "Robb would not be happy with me if I allowed you to come!"

Torrhen, nearby, nodded.

Hermione scowled back. "You know, I could follow you, right?"

Edmure looked at her skeptically. "How?"

Hermione looked around the courtyard. Catelyn Stark stood above them, on the second-floor balcony that protruded from a tower, watching her brother and his men. The distance wasn't far - no more than a flight of stairs up, but the entrance was inside the castle and therefore, currently inaccessible by those in the courtyard unless they had a ladder to scale.

Unless someone had magic.

Her pictured the balcony beside Catelyn, having explored it once before, and pictured it in her head. Then, she turned on her heel.

There was a loud pop and she reappeared beside the startled woman, who shrieked and stepped back, her scarred hands at her throat in surprise. Below, Edmure and Torrhen, as well as the few soldiers who lingered in the courtyard, let out shouts of surprise.

Hermione leaned over the balcony and waved.

They let her join them.

_________________________________________

TBC
Chapter Notes

Dialogue from 2.06 at the end, "The Old Gods and the New".

The Winter Witch VI

It's the time between battles that is boring.

The battle itself is fast, frantic; there is the pounding of armoured boots, the stampede of hooves, and the shouts and cries of men, as well as the scent of freshly dug up earth, piss, and other bodily fluids. It's screams and calls for help, with the loud pounding of the heart in the ears and the furiously panting of breathes against the rough inner plate of the mouth guard in the helmet.

*Everything else is boring, including inventory,* thought Robb.

Two weeks on from Riverrun (*and from Hermione,* his brain supplied), Robb was in his tent, surrounded on all sides by his Kingsguard as well as several Northern Lords who would lead the foot soldiers.

Over a week ago, Grey Wind had found a lesser-known path through the mountains between the riverlands and the edge of the westerlands - where the outermost banner men for the Lannisters lived - and at the village of Oxcross, Robb and his army took Stafford Lannister and his men by surprise. The man had not placed sentries up to monitor the area, and Robb took advantage of that, using not only his fledgling warging abilities - peering through Grey Wind's eyes to see the area and camp - but also to use Grey Wind himself to scare the Lannister horses.

It wasn't much of a battle, though. It was over within hours, and the Northern army picked off stragglers as the sun rose over the crest of the mountains, the sunlight bleeding its ways across the treetops of the valley.

The success bolstered the men, and Robb sent an update on the parchment Hermione spelled for them listing each member of his army and House sworn to him, and their duties while apprising them of his situation. The Northern army commanders with him had congratulatory notes of their success and a few knighthoods to celebrate; Lord Glover and his men were ready to move south along the Trident, towards Harrenhal and route the Lannister forces along the way, predominantly engaging the Mountain - Gregor Clegane - and his men in battle to keep them busy and away from supporting Tywin's forces.

His mother, despite being wary of Lady Hermione and her magic, appreciated the secure line of communication she created, and announced her own journey south to treat with Renly Baratheon, just after Edmure left with his host.

Edmure. Robb's mouth turned down at the thought of his uncle. His last message was to hold Riverrun - which the man was doing, although there had been a worrisome note that accompanied Edmure's most recent update: *Planning a feint to draw in T Lannister - it will keep him from being too close to Harrenhal for a strategic retreat. We have a plan that will draw him further into the*
But who is "we"? And what doesn't he understand about my orders to 'hold Riverrun'? I didn't say go forth and have a bloody battle, wondered Robb, the night before the northern army was to attack Ashemark. The castle was close to Casterly Rock, along with the Crag, and therefore were two of the more important seats that Robb needed to take. His advisors - predominantly his Great-Uncle, the Blackfish, and the Greatjon - had taken his suggestions and battle plans and refined them to the point that Robb was incredibly sure of their success.

But while his mind was on the morning - of that battle to happen - there was a part of him back at Riverrun.

He knew it.

And his men knew it, too.

"Shall we go over the battle plan for the morning, Your Majesty?" suggested the Blackfish in a loud voice, startling Robb enough that he pressed the communication parchment down with the flat of his palm on the tabletop.

His blue eyes flew up, and caught on his Great-Uncle and the man's knowing smirk. At the other side of the large man, stood Lord Bolton, who wordlessly tipped his head to the side.

Robb followed the direction and his eyes fell on his fifteen-year-old squire, the one he was forced to take on through Walder Frey's ridiculous terms that his mother agreed to; Olyvar, completely unaware of his King's eyes on him, stepped forward and filled Robb's cup with more ale.

Oh, he thought, and mentally winced. A reminder. And a caution.

Robb cleared his throat. "Thank you, Olyvar."

The teen, all gangly arms and legs, beamed up at him. "Your Grace." He then stepped back and Robb turned his attention to the map in front.

"Right," the young King began, his voice carrying across the tent, "This is the plan for attacking Ashemark in the morning..."

Originally, Edmure wanted to meet Tywin Lannister and his forces at the Red Fork, the southernmost run of the Trident River. It was barely a weeks' ride from Harrenhal, but strategically smart as the bank on one side of the river was higher than the other, and steeper. It would've been hell for any force trying to cross the cold water north towards Riverrun.

Hermione, as well as Torrhen, Lord Jason Mallister (an older man similar in age to Edmure's father, she was told), Lord Tytos Blackwood (another robust man in his early fifties sworn to the Tullys), his son Brynden, of age to Torrhen, Lord Karyl Vance, and Lord Jonos Bracken, talked him out of it.

"What's the point of a feint, drawing him in, if you're all that willing to meet him closer to Harrenhal?" she argued.

Edmure frowned. "It's a good location for a battle - we'd have the high ground."

"We can give up the high ground of the Trident for other locations along the way," rumbled Mallister in a low, gravelly voice. "The plan you have of creating strategic forts along both sides of the river is
sound, but not so close."

"The point is to drive Tywin Lannister out of Harrenhal and far enough away that he can't retreat without heavy loss or being cut down from behind," replied Torrhen, crossing thick his arms across a very muscled chest. Not that Hermione was eyeing him, not at all.

They were together in a large canvas tent, standing around a heavy table that several squires and knights had brought in with them. A large map of the riverlands had been unrolled and stretched across the table, with Lord Vance and Lord Bracken's cups of ale holding two corners down flat. On the other corner were two small candelabras, dripping wax rolling down the handles and pooling onto the map over the Bloody Gate and the Crag. Hermione's eyes lingered on the name of the castle near the sea, knowing that Robb and his men would be marching toward it soon.

"But there are castles between Harrenhal and Riverrun that need defending, too," argued Bracken, the man's blue eyes flashing as he glared at Hermione.

"You're not the only one with a castle in the way," snorted Blackwood, rolling his eyes. "Or have you forgotten that Raventree Hall can draw Tywin's eyes just as easily as Stone Hedge?" The man's dark eyes narrowed and a small smirk appeared on his lips underneath his moustache. "Or is it that Stone Hedge can't defend itself as well as Raventree Hall?"

"Alright!" called Edmure loudly, physically holding his arms up on either side as to keep the two men, who were glaring at each other from over their liege lord's son's head, apart. "The trick will be drawing in the Lannister forces, thinking they have us on the run."

"Best begin here," said Mallister, pointing just northeast of Riverrun along the Red Fork. "We can place a large amount - or what Tywin will think is a large amount of soldiers - here. He'll come up through Acorn Hall and High Heart and meet us on the Fork."

"That will spare both Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge," agreed Vance, a tall, quiet man, nodding as his eyes took in the map.

"Is Lord Glover still fighting for Harrenhal?" asked Edmure, glancing at Hermione.

She sighed. Somehow, probably due to being the person who created the communications parchments, she had become their secretary. She shuffled through the many papers on her side of the table, and Torrhen, who stood nearly an entire foot above her, leaned down to look over her shoulder.

The tall, muscular bodyguard Robb had assigned to her nodded. "Lord Glover wrote that he's attempting another assault on the castle. He has around ten thousand to aid him."

Bracken scowled. "So does Tywin."

The men all shared looks. Eventually, Edmure cleared his throat nervously. "How many do we have?"

Mallister sent him a look, and Hermione inaudibly sighed. You should know how many men you command, Edmure…

"Around the same," the older man said.

Around her, the men began speaking of how many men they would put where, where they could retreat, and where they could advance. Hermione's eyes glanced all over the map, again, and she rolled her bottom lip into her mouth to begin chewing on it.
In order to hold Riverrun, and stop Tywin Lannister from progressing further north, they had to do
two things: either crush him entirely, or decimate his numbers enough that he was forced to flee back
to his vassals, or elsewhere. Ideally, keeping him from returning to any of his vassals was important;
that meant less men for him to attack Robb with, especially as the northern army only had a fraction
of the men that both Edmure and Lord Glover controlled. But attacking him so soundly would be to
take away from Robb's desire to do so, given that man's family had singularly attacked his. Not that
Hermione agreed with revenge…

"In the end, it won't matter," she finally spoke up, drawing their attention.

"What's she doing here, again?" asked Bracken, his voice annoyed.

Torrhen's hand immediately moved to the hilt of his sword, just as Edmure spoke up, "Here, now,
Bracken - she's helping us!"

"Helping how?" the man continued. "What will she do? Cast a spell? Make a magic potion? The
witches of Asshai use their blood magic to-"

Whatever the witches of Asshai did with their blood magic (and Hermione would rather love to
know - but another day), no one ever found out. Hermione instead had her wand pointed at the man,
who was now mouthing words soundlessly.

"Lord Bracken, I am here to help this army succeed as much as they can," she snapped, eyes flashing
amber. "I understand that you don't like me, nor do you trust me - and the feeling is mutual. But I
want to help, and that is what I will do. So don't get in my way."

She lifted the wordless silencio she had cast. The tent was tense and silent under her threat and the
presence of magic.

Bracken scowled, but cleared his throat to test it, and then said, in a very gruff voice, "Fine."

Lord Vance shifted nervously, while Blackwood almost looked gleeful at the other man's dressing
down. Edmure shook his head, and muttered, "We need to work together, Lady Hermione."

Hermione took at the admonishment with ease, letting it roll off her shoulders. "Look - keep in
mind I don't need to be here. I can head back to Riverrun easily and leave completely. What I
can do is make things easier, whether it is set up proximity wards, or cast an illusion. I can make ten men
look like a hundred or set up wards that will herd the Lannister forces directly to you." She met the
men's eyes as she spoke. "Are you really going to turn away help when it is offered freely?"

Blackwood let out a muffled laugh, and Mallister sighed. "Very well - Lady Hermione, what do you
suggest?"

Hermione pointed her finger to where Mallister had suggested they ultimately meet the Lannister
forces, north on the Red Fork but instead of northeast, southwest of Riverrun and across from Stone
Mill. "Let's have the majority of the forces here, like Lord Mallister suggested. We'll set up a series of
defenses along the way, starting from Acorn Hall. The Lannister forces will need to pass near it to
make their way towards us."

"It's a small keep," said Vance quietly, knowing that it was under his protection. "An invading force
would destroy it."

"We can make sure they pass it," soothed Hermione, looking directly at the man. "I can Apparate
there in a series of small hops, or Torrhen and a few others can ride down ahead with me. I can set
up Muggle Repellant wards, and those will make everyone who goes near it think of something else
"That's possible?" asked a surprised Mallister.

Hermione nodded.

Torrhen's eyes narrowed. "Is it something similar to what you set up at Riverrun? What's holding the Kingslayer in the room?"

Hermione winced. "Kind of. I have Ser Jaime under a blood ward that used Robb's blood. Only Robb can enter or exit the room when he's in the castle, but I had to change it once he left so that Ser Jaime could still be fed. I ended up using some of Robb's blood in a few medallions that he gave to his mother and Maester Vyman, as well as the guards who bring him his food. Only those with the medallions can go in and out."

Hermione glanced around the room, and realized that, for the most part, the men around her were looking like they understood what she said, but in all truth, it was probably like she was speaking High Valyrian to them.

She sighed, casting her eyes on the Tully heir. He needed confidence and experience, so... "Edmure? What do you think about positioning the men near Stone Mill?"

The reason why Robb didn't continue further from Oxcross to Casterly Rock, despite it being ridiculously close, was because he wanted to scare Tywin Lannister. Wanted him to know that he could get that close to his precious home - could stroll right up and take what he wanted at any time. He was the Young Wolf - the King in the North - and he could conquer.

Except he didn't want to; conquer, that was.

So Robb moved the army north, towards Ashemark in the mountains, overtaking the castle easily and taking the quarry as well as the gold mines. Wars were won with gold, as Tywin Lannister had taught Westeros.

He turned his attention to the coast, the castles and keeps that were often at war with Theon's kin - the Greyjoys - as the Pike and Iron Islands just off the west coast. While he sent smaller forces to take Nunn's Deep, Pendric Hills and what was left of Castamere, the majority of his force would turn their eyes to the Crag, which in turn would be facing toward the sea for the next attack, never expecting one from the land.

He sat atop his horse, Grey Wind now almost on par with the large equine, at his right. Behind him on their own horses were his great-uncle, his kingsguard of Daryn, Eddard, Dacey, and several other Lords. They were as camouflaged as possible, in the surrounding woods of the ruined Crag - a holdfast that was more broken rock and rotted wood than grandeur, but they held Gawen Westerling captive since the same time of Kingslayer - and behind the large boulders that had, hundreds of years ago, rolled down the mountainside.

They were hidden by the elongating shadows as the sun dipped into the far ocean, dusk falling quickly as the nights grew longer. They were not about to light any torches, either, so Robb took advantage of the failing light to finish his correspondence.

"News from Riverrun is that Lady Catelyn has returned safely," read Olyvar Frey to the quiet king and his men. "However Renly Baratheon is dead."

There was some shifting as Robb turned in his saddle, the leather creaking as he did so, to look at his
squire. "How?"

Olyvar squinted in the dusk. "Lady Catelyn doesn't write how, Your Grace - other than she returned with a… Lady Brienne? Brienne of Tarth?"

Behind, Karstark snorted. Maege glared hotly at him. "Something to say, Karstark?"

"Nothing, Lady Mormont," the burly man replied, smothering the mirth on his face. "I don't think you would find anything untoward of women in armour. Perhaps Lady Brienne has kin within the she-bears of Bear Island?"

"Don't you wish," muttered Dacey under her breath. At her other side, in response, Eddard Karstark shifted his horse closer to Daryn Hornwood.

Robb stifled a sigh. "Anything else? With Renly dead, Stannis will surely make for King's Landing next, after consolidating his power and taking some of Renly's men."

"Most likely," agreed Bolton quietly, just as Olyvar continued, "Lord Umber and Lord Galbart are both ready to attack Castamere and Pendric Hill at dusk; and Lord Manderly and Lord Forrester are within a few hours' reach of Nunn's Deep."

"Good," said Robb, feeling a mix of pleasure and anticipation begin to thrum through his veins as he turned his eyes back towards the glittering sea, just visible and peeking through a mix of foliage and turrets of the Crag ahead of them.

"Oh!" said Olyvar, as new writing appeared on the parchment, just as the last remnants of the sun dipped into the ocean.

When the young squire failed to say anything else, Robb turned again to face him, as did Bolton, Maege, and Karstark. The Frey teen's face was pale, with a tint of green, although that was hard to make out in the dark.

"Olyvar?" asked Robb, his stomach fluttering. The anticipation and pleasure he felt was leeching out into something else.

The skinny squire's dark eyes were wide, enough so that Robb could see the whites as the sun began its descent into the ocean.

"Speak, boy!" ordered Karstark roughly.

"M-My Lord," stuttered Olyvar, his eyes moving to remain on the parchment, his tongue thick as he began to read, "M-Maester Vyman writes t-that ravens have c-come from the W-White Harbour, Barrowtown, and the D-Dreadfort. W-Winterfell has been s-seized by Theon G-Greyjoy and an Ironborn army."

Robb turned fully in his saddle, incredulity building as Olyvar spoke. His stomach roiled. "What?"

"S-Ser Roderick C-Cassell is d-dead…"

"This cannot be true," muttered Robb, his heart pounding furiously in his chest, a sudden sweat breaking out along his spine despite an increasing chill. "Why? Why would Theon…"

From just behind Olyvar, Karstark's face turned down into a deep scowl. "Because the Greyjoys are treasonous whores."
Robb turned back to Olyvar quickly, clenching tight on the reins until his knuckles turned white. At his side, Grey Wind began to shift. Robb's voice nearly cracked as he spoke, in desperation, "My brothers?"

Olyvar looked back at the parchment. "Nothing, Your Grace."

The Blackfish spat on the ground to the side of his horse. "Never trust a Greyjoy!"

"I must go north at once," whispered Robb, eyes unseeing of the Crag ahead, thinking only of Bran and Rickon. His body was shivering, and all the thoughts and plans he had for attacking the Crag meant nothing if he was without his family - without a home.

*What else would be taken from me before this war is over?* he thought darkly.

Bolton moved his horse forward and leaned towards his King, aborting a move to reach forwards and shake the man. "There's still a war to win, Your Grace!"

Robb turned his eyes on his banner man, face drawn. "How can I call myself 'King' if I can't hold my own castle? How can I ask men to follow me if..."

Bolton made a strange sound in his throat. For a man who never raised his weak and raspy voice, it sounded similar to a hiss. "You are a king! And that means you don't have to do everything yourself."

"Bolton's right," agreed the Blackfish in a quiet voice, moving his own horse closer to Robb, who turned his head to face his great-uncle. "Theon holds the castle with a skeleton crew. We can send word to many remaining men in the North; they can raise a few hundred men and retake Winterfell before the new moon."

Karstark nodded. "We have the Lannisters on the run; if you march all the way back north now, you lose what you gained." He paused, and then said: "We can return to Riverrun shortly after taking the Crag, Your Grace. The Lady Hermione is there, and perhaps she can do something...?"

At her name, Robb felt his body sag. *Hermione, yes -* he thought, with a tiny nod. *Perhaps she will have an idea of what to do..."

"Who is still in the north?" asked Robb, his voice low but gaining in confidence.

"Lady Barbrey Dustin remains," said Karstark, just as Bolton said, "And my son and his men at the Dreadfort."

Robb slowly nodded. "Tell your son and Lady Dustin that Bran and Rickon's safety is paramount. As for Theon...I want him brought to me alive. I want to look him in the eye and ask him why, and then I will take his head myself!"

He grit his teeth and turned back to the front, to the flickering torches that beckoned where the Crag lay surrounded by crofter's huts and outlying buildings. "As for the Crag - we will take it, as well as Nunn's Deep, Pendric Hill, and Castamere tonight! And we will let not only Tywin Lannister know what the North is capable of, but we will send a message to Balon Greyjoy as well: Winter is Coming! And it's coming for them!"

Grey Wind threw back his head and howled, long and loudly through the still night. It was the signal they were waiting for: Robb, never one to lead from the rear, charged forward with his Kingsguard at his side and his trusted Lords and Lady, their horse's hooves kicking up dirt and stones as they rushed down the forested incline until they reached level ground.
There was no warning from the castle; the men had thought with Robb's attack of Oxcross and Ashemark that he would turn his attention to Castamere or the Golden Tooth instead. As such, there were no sentries as they approached the small town outside the Crag's walls. While Mormont, Karstark, and Bolton men began a battering ram to open the doors to the Crag, Smalljon Umber and Walder Frey crept around the sides of the castle, closer to the north and south beaches, and began to scale the sides of the external walls.

And then they were in, the rotted wooden doors that led into the Crag breaking and splintering through the force of the ram.

For Robb, although it wasn't his first, nor would it be his last, battle, he felt like he experienced it in snippets.

His blood, already boiling from the thought of Theon's betrayal, meant his temper was barely in check. His heart pounded furiously in his chest, echoing loudly in his ears to the point he barely heard the screams and shouts of those around him.

At his side, Grey Wind leapt and attacked with a ferocity that Robb had never seen. His mouth salivated and there was a strange, phantom taste of iron - blood? - in his mouth but he hadn't bit his tongue, cheek or lip, nor had he been bashed in the face.

The taste distracted him, and when one second he was on the back of his horse, the next the wind was knocked out of him and he was on his knees, rolling to his feet in his armour on the dirt entrance to the Crag. Pushing past him were his soldiers, although he spotted Daryn - bare-headed as he usually went - slice past a Westerling guard in tan-beige with a white trim tunic who was aiming a bow and arrow at Robb.

He, in turn, raised his sword to his friend in salute, and threw himself forward. Meeting the first Westerling soldier, he hit him with harsh slash that cut through his neck. Robb didn't stop, anger at Theon manifesting itself in his attack. His mind was numb and his feet moved without guidance, just as his arm fell into a familiar pattern: slash, parry, thrust, parry, block, stab.

Around him fell bloodstained bodies, just as the iron-blood taste in his mouth grew as Grey Wind tasted more and more human flesh. A man in armour roared and raced towards Robb, who snarled in return and raised his broadsword with both arms, his fingers flexing on the hilt. He planted his foot and pushed forward, his sword ready to come down with a quick slash -

Pain erupted in Robb's shoulder and the force of something hitting him sent him skittering and landing heavily on his back, the air rushing out of him as his sword fell from his grip and clattered loudly in the dirt next to him.

Black spots danced in his vision and the roar in his ears - one he thought was the echo of his heart - grew louder.

Somewhere, distantly, Robb heard someone shout, "YOUR GRACE!"

He turned his head to his left side, eyes wide. Protruding from the small, unarmed place between his shoulder pad and chest plate, was an arrow.

Oh, he thought, and then his eyes fluttered shut.

TBC
With plans made, Hermione Apparated back to Riverrun early the next morning, without alerting anyone in the Tully castle, and gathered a few items from her tent. The inside of the green tent, looking like a small two-bedroom country cottage, was a mess of epic Ron Weasley proportions. Hermione had been taking advantage of having double the space - she lived and slept on her much comfier bed in the tent than the one in the room Robb had given her in Riverrun, but it also meant that she had twice the space to cover with her scrolls, parchment, and books.

Her living room in the tent had overflowed with her research, and was currently taking up the seating area in front of the fireplace in her Riverrun quarters. Robb had showed some foresight and kindness, as the room she was in was similar to her description of the Gryffindor common room back at Hogwarts, except the abundance of red in Gryffindor was muted to a trim colour on gold with Tully blue. However, there was a large, unused poster bed, several couches and armchairs, and a table with four wooden chairs around it by the fireplace, as well as many throw rugs under the majority of the furniture.

But what she needed was in her tent, in the bedroom Harry and Ron had shared. Some of their clothes, including Harry's Quidditch jersey, was still left laying haphazardly across his cot. The room had the air of the Gryffindor boy's dorm room: musty, old socks, sweat, and something else Hermione didn't like to think about.

Quickly, she held her breath and made her way to the four-tier dresser, pulling open the top drawer to yank out a wooden box. She clutched it to her chest and then spun on her heel, the crack muted as she travelled from Riverrun to Stone Mill in an instant.

She took in a deep gulp of air as she appeared next to Torrhen just outside the low stone wall that surrounded the tall mill. The sun was just peeking over the edge of the horizon, bathing the riverlands and nearby farms in a soft, orange glow.

Torrhen jumped but did his best to appear unaffected by her immediate arrival, but Hermione spied the quick bob of his Adam's Apple and hid a grin.

"All right?" she asked casually, striding forward and letting him fall into place behind her and to the right. They began moving between canvas tents set up by the northern and riverlands soldiers who accompanied Edmure, skitting around open-flame fits and one portable smithy.

"Just fine," the tall twenty-something Karstark replied. "Did you get what you needed, Lady Hermione?"

Hermione turned slightly and gestured at the wooden box in her arms.
"What's that going to do, then?"

"It'll help with warding larger properties," she answered, and then they were at the command tent.

Edmure, looking queasy but determined to keep a solid face on, looked up from the map on their table and nodded at the two. Mallister and Blackwood were with him. He turned to his squire and ordered, "Find Lord Bracken and Lord Vance and tell them to come to the command tent, immediately."

The teen raced out and Hermione placed the wooden box on top of the map.

Blackwood eyed it skeptically. "What's in it?"

"Some salt, some potions," said Hermione evenly, with a limp hand movement. "Chalk, as well. I'm going to need to ward the entire property of Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge in order to ensure that you don't get any surprises."

Blackwood closed his eyes in gratitude, despite being unsure of her abilities. "My thanks, Lady Hermione. When will you go?"

"As soon as Lord Bracken is here," she answered. "It's best we ride out immediately to seeing distance to each location, and then I'll Apparate us over to complete the ward scheme."

"Apparate?" asked Lord Mallister.

Torrhen and Edmure both made faces, but Edmure answered, hesitantly, "She… pops from one place to another."

Both Blackwood and Mallister looked at Hermione, who smiled demurely back. The tent flap opened at that moment though, stopping them from asking any further questions, and Lord Vance and Lord Bracken entered, along with Edmure's squire.

"Excellent, let's begin," said Edmure, his voice barely shaking. "Lady Hermione will take Lord Blackwood and Lord Bracken on horseback towards Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge, in order to place these… protective ward schemes she has suggested."

"I'll be going too," interrupted Torrhen, squaring his shoulders back as everyone turned to him.

"You don't need to," argued Hermione kindly, "It'll be a quick in-and-out thing."

Torrhen shook his head, the candlelight in the tent catching on his light brown hair and turning it russet. "King Robb asked me to protect you, and while you are," he looked her up and down, "capable, Lady Hermione, I'd feel better at your side."

Edmure nodded slowly. "Very well; Lords Blackwood and Bracken, as well as Lady Hermione and Karstark here will travel on horseback towards the two, while Mallister and Vance here will organize our forces and begin making token defenses along the Red Fork, starting just south of here, across from Acorn Hall. We'll continue through past Riverrun, towards Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge, and finish by the Inn at the Crossroads."

"How much time will you need for these defenses?" asked Vance, turning to Hermione.

"Not much," she replied, "About an hour to ward everything, but I'll be tired afterwards for a few. Once I've visited a place, I can Apparate back, and take someone with me in a Side-Along."
"So within a day?" clarified Vance, frowning slightly.

Hermione nodded.

"Good," said Mallister instead, interrupting, "As scouts estimate that we only have a few days before
the Lannister army is in sight. No more than five, and I am sure it will take you the better part of a
day or two with a hard ride to reach Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge."

With that said, the groups broke off, leaving Edmure with Mallister and Vance in the command tent,
and Hermione, Torrhen, and Lords Blackwood and Bracken with her towards the horses.

_I'm going to have to get used to this_, sighed Hermione, eyeing the large brown horse Torrhen easily
swung up onto, as well as the large black warhorse Blackwood sat astride and the grey one Bracken
used.

Torrhen held out a hand for Hermione to grasp, and with ill ease, she gripped his wrist. He tightened
his grip around her wrist and hauled her up and onto the saddle in front of him. Hermione scrambled
into an upright position, her hands white-knuckled as she gripped the pommel and her thighs
squeezed the side of the horse. Being on Torrhen's horse was a different feeling altogether than being
on Buckbeak, or the Gringotts dragon.

It whinnied and Torrhen smothered a laugh as he said, "Easy, Lady Hermione. I won't let you fall."

"It's not the fall that I'm worried about," she muttered, but the Karstark soldier laughed behind her
and wrapped his arms forward, holding the reins lightly in one hand and chuckling his tongue to get
his horse moving.

The ride was mind-numbingly boring, for Hermione, who spent the better part of it with her eyes
squeezed shut, her fear driving her to recite Gamp's Transfiguration Laws at least ten times until her
heart rate calmed enough to realize that Torrhen was speaking behind her, over the sniping
comments that Blackwood and Bracken were sharing with another.

"-and, if you can see it, Lady Hermione, that there in the distance is High Heart," he was saying, his
voice a soothing, low murmur. "We're going to go to there because we'll be able to see all the way
down to Harrenhal and the God's Eye Lake. I haven't seen it myself, but I've heard it is quite
something..."

"Thanks," she muttered back, slowly opening her eyes and sucking in a breath as she realized how
quickly they were cantering through farmland and through forested paths, all leading closer and
closer to the hill in front of them, looming over the landscape.

"Of course, my Lady," he replied. "We'll be at High Heart soon."

"How soon?"

'Soon' was still two hours, but by the time they reached the crest of the hill, the three horses had
slowed and Torrhen led them off the path and through the thick woods. They often had to duck
under low-hanging moss and branches. Noise was muted within the foliage, and the air was
significantly cool that Hermione shivered in the shadows.

From the corner of her eye, she thought she saw something, and she turned partially in the shadow
and Torrhen's arms to look at it.

"What was that?" she asked. Between the green of the trees, there was a flash of white, and then
two, beady red orbs, but they disappeared quickly.
"Do you see something, Lady Hermione?" called Blackwood from just behind.

At the man's other side, Bracken tensed and shifted his gaze to the thick trunks and bushes around them. "Perhaps it is the Ghost of High Heart?"

"Ghost?" repeated Hermione.

Torrhen nodded, and Hermione felt the movement of his chest, the brush of his armour against her sweater as he spoke. "Aye, the Ghost of High Heart, who gives out prophecies to those who seek her out."

Alarmed, Hermione squeaked, "Prophecies?" Merlin, I thought I escaped that when Harry killed Voldemort!

"Planning to seek advice on marriage, Lady Hermione?" teased Lord Blackwood with a short guaff of laughter.

Behind her, Torrhen turned partially and sent a glare at the man. "Don't give my father hope, Lord Blackwood!"

Yeah, thought Hermione, Yeah, that's not happening.

They emerged on the other side of the forested peak of the hill, overlooking the north. The landscape was a patchwork quilt was farmed fields, small clusters of trees, and thatched roofs. In the distance, Hermione could see the smoky blue haze around the mountain range near Riverrun, as well as a tiny, meandering blue streak that she knew to be the Trident's many forking rivers; that particular river was the Red Fork.

And, ahead, were two grey structures; one rose prominently in a rectangular shape whereas the other was blackened and smaller - Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge, respectively. A thin trail of smoke lazily danced in the air from Stone Hedge.

Beside Torrhen, on their hoses, Lord Blackwood and Lord Bracken came to a stop, surveying the land and smaller keeps that dotted the landscape of vassals under their leadership - minor houses - and Bracken sucked in a sharp breath that had the others turn to him.

"My home!" he cried lowly, a keening noise.

Hermione turned back and narrowed her eyes, glancing all over the smaller of the two keeps, until she spotted a bright red cloth waving in the soft breeze. It meant something to the other men, as Blackwood growled.

"Lannisters," Torrhen hissed.

Hermione turned back to the smaller, blackened keep. From her beaded bag, Hermione pulled out a pair of used Omnoculars - remnants of the Quidditch World Cup - and brought them to her eyes, using the features to zoom in on Stone Hedge. The red cloth she saw had a golden lion rearing back on it, very unlike the Gryffindor lion. There were several armoured men around the battlements of the keep, but the front gate was open and it looked like they were not expecting any resistance - from outside or within.

"We've been gone barely two moons," griped Blackwood. "When did the Lannisters sneak their way here?"

"There's been talk of the Mountain leading men through the riverlands," said Torrhen quietly,
shifting his horse as it whinied nervously. "He could have done that."

"He wouldn't've stayed," responded Blackwood grimly. "Just burnt the keep after raping and pillaging his way through."

Hermione, mouth opened, turned to the men. "Rape and pillage? Just who is this man?"

"Gregor Clegane," replied Bracken, anger thrumming through his words. "Tywin Lannister's enforcer. The man is tall and built like a mountain, hence his name. He's vile and dangerous."

"They say he killed his own sister and father," continued Blackwood, "And that he burnt his younger brother's face just because he didn't like the boy."

"Merlin," whispered Hermione, turning back to the smoking keep. Her eyes hardened. "We need to do something about this."

"You said this wasn't your fight, Lady Hermione," said Torrhen quietly, "And we have Raventree Hall to protect, as well as the upcoming fight with the Lannister forces marching on Riverrun."

"It won't take long." Hermione's mouth was pressed into a long, thin line. "We can do Raventree Hall first, anyway." She shook her head. "If this - Mountain - Clegane - is at Stone Hedge, then he needs to be stopped."

"Better men and greater soldiers than little wood witches like you have tried, Lady Hermione," cautioned Blackwood, wrinkles deepening around his eyes as he faced the woman.

"Well," replied Hermione, her tone dark, "They weren't me, were they?"

As per their original plan, they decided to ward Raventree Hall first. However, by horseback it could've taken hours to reach the castle, so by wary agreement, Hermione was going to Side-Along the soldiers one at a time, starting with Lord Blackwood.

Hermione reached out and wrapped her arm around Blackwood's, in a parody of the gesture Robb had extended to her when she first arrived at Riverrun.

"This is probably going to be unpleasant," warned Hermione.

"How unplea-?"

Hermione spun on her heel and with a loud crack they displaced the air around them and reappeared near the gates, much to the surprise of several Blackwood guards, who raised their bows from the two towers by the gate. At her side, Blackwood was hunched over, retching their jerky lunch to the grass.

One of the guards recognized him, calling nervously, "Lord Blackwood? My lord? A-Are you well?"

Blackwood held up a hand and coughed, and then straightened. He levelled a glare on Hermione, one that was rendered moot by the green tint to his scraggly face. "'Unpleasant,' Lady Hermione, is an understatement."

Hermione shrugged. "I'm going to get the others. Can you explain to your men what I'm going to do so they don't pepper me with arrows?"

Blackwood nodded, and she disapparated again, appearing back on High Heart. Bracken cursed
loudly at her arrival, as it sent his horse skittering back into a bush.

"Torrhen, you'd best come next," she suggested, and the tall Karstark guard merely nodded, his face grim. Instead of taking his arm, she took his hand, and appeared at the gate of Raventree Hall, which now had several other Blackwood soldiers outside, along with Blackwood himself who was explaining Hermione's plan.

By the time she completed the trip with Lord Bracken, who did not vomit on arrival, much to Blackwood's ire, the Blackwood men were staring at Hermione in shocked awe.

"How long will this take?" the Stone Hedge lord asked irritably as they stood within the inner courtyard.

"An hour or so," replied Hermione, already eyeing the far corners of the front of the hall. "I just need to get at the cornerstones, and once that is done, a map of the castle and grounds."

With Torrhen trailing her, as well as Lord Blackwood and several curious guards, Hermione crouched in front of one grey stone at the corner between the far right wall by the gate, and drew Uruz, the rune for strength; at the opposite corner, Algiz the rune for protection; at the other end of Raventree Hall, in the corners, she drew Ihwaz for longevity, and Berkano for hidden things. At each chalky rune, she finished the drawing by tapping it with her wand and infusing it with her magic.

Slightly dizzy, she took an offered cup of cider from Torrhen, gulping the amber liquid down quickly. Once done, Blackwood offered her a map of Raventree Hall, and with a drop of his blood, Hermione traced a ward line along the property, finishing the Muggle Repellant ward tied only to the man's bloodline.

By the time Hermione had finished her work, the sun was high above Raventree Hall, and she had the grimy feeling of dried sweat along her hairline and down her spine. Her head was no longer spinning, a side effect of charging the runes to cover a large parcel of land due to magical exhaustion. She knew she was no magical powerhouse like Harry was, her strength lying in books and spellcraft, but she was no slouch either.

*It's just been awhile since I stretched my magic,* she thought wryly; most of her time the past year since the Battle of Hogwarts had been spent on *geminio* and *reparo*, copying books from the library at Hogwarts or repairing sections of crumbling walls and stairs.

The group had migrated from the inner courtyard to Blackwood's solar, a light-infused office where prisms of colour danced through the many floor to ceiling windows against white-washed weirwood panels. Hermione was resting on a low chair near the fire with Torrhen standing beside her, while Lord Blackwood's heir Brynden (who remained at the castle while he was gone), as well as his other third and fourth sons Hoster and Edmund, Blackwood's castellan, a dour-looking brown-haired man named Aethl, and Lord Bracken, stood in a loose semi-circle facing Blackwood, who sat behind his desk.

Blackwood heaved a sigh. "What do we know about the Lannister force at Stone Hedge?"

His eldest son Brynden, a tall, broad-shouldered young man replied quickly. "A small group of them moved through the riverlands quickly; they bypassed us though and went straight for Lord Bracken's."

The man in question began a nervous pace. "What happened to my people?"
Brynden Blackwood shrugged. "We don't have communication with Stone Hedge, so anything we learned was after-the-fact. The keep itself was burned, and there were several dead."

Hermione frowned at the callous words, and Bracken snarled. "Are my people's lives a jest to you?"

The young man shrugged, and Hermione got the feeling that something else was going on between the two. She turned to Torrhen but he was focused on the conversation in front of him.

Scowls were passed between the Blackwoods and the Bracken, until Hoster Blackwood, a gangly teen taller than even his father at seven feet, spoke. He had bookish mannerisms from Hermione's perspective, and the cowlick at the back of his head endeared her to him. "Past a certain point, all the dates grow hazy and confused, and the clarity of history becomes the fog of legend."

His words cautioned his father and Lord Bracken, and significantly cooled the tempers.

"My apologies," said Brynden Blackwood stiffly, but sincerely. He struggled for a moment visibly, but then said, "The Mountain did come through but it was some time ago. I do not believe that he attacked Stone Hedge, and that those Lannisters who remain are a small contingent."

"What kind of numbers?" barked Lord Blackwood.

"Less than twenty," said Aethl, the castellan, "But more than ten. They have been burning through the Stone Hedge provisions quickly and made some hesitant inquiries towards us recently."

"We can't do a full-scale attack," sighed Brynden, "As they will see us coming."

"Then what *can* we do?" asked Bracken, angrily.

"Use the backdoor."

Everyone turned to Hermione. She met their eyes and continued, "We use the backdoor. And while I'm guessing you don't *physically* have a backdoor, I can make one. Into a storage larder? Or pantry? We can sneak in from behind. We'll leave a token resistance at the front, capturing their attention and come from the rear in a pincer movement."

Lord Blackwood and Lord Bracken were staring at her, as well Aethl; and Brynden had his mouth open. Hoster and Edmund both looked befuddled, like it was strange to hear her speak, while Torrhen was smothering a grin.

"That..." sputtered Blackwood, "That works."

Bracken composed himself first. "Then... now?"

Hermione agreed; the sooner they left, the sooner they'd return to Edmure and that battle. Blackwood turned to his castellan and had him write Edmure a note saying that were delayed, and Brynden and Hoster gathered a handful of armed soldiers to join them as the front assault.

For Hermione, she swallowed heavily. It would be the first time since the Battle of Hogwarts that she would be involved in a fight. *I just hope I don't let anyone down.*

Brynden led the front, charging towards Stone Hedge in a sea of blood red and black ravens trimmed with white - for their sigil - while Bracken led Blackwood, Torrhen, Hermione, as well as two other Raventree Hall guards behind the keep. There was a small village of wooden huts and some in stone around the keep, all closely packed together. There was a heaviness in the air, one Hermione
recognized from her time leading up to the Battle of Hogwarts; in Hogsmeade, the village was quiet and still, with the townsfolk barely peeking out of their windows - it was the same here.

"Behind here," whispered Bracken, pointing from their hidden spot between a blacksmith and a tanner at a portion of the Stone Hedge wall that led up to a large tower. "The base of this leads to the larder."

Hermione stepped forward, just partially out of the alleyway, and flicked her wrist to slide her wand into her grasp. She then pointed at the wall, imagined a porthole, and said, "Evanesco." A portion of the stone wall of the keep vanished, leaving a small hole large enough for them to crawl through.

Lord Bracken went first, with Hermione second and the rest following behind. One they were inside the larder, which was nearly bare, Hermione turned back to the wall and whispered, "reparifarge," returning the stone transfiguration to its base. She then wordlessly lit her wand with a lumos, as once the hole repaired they were cast into darkness.

"Lead the way," whispered Hermione, and together, they crept out of the larder into the kitchen. One sculley maid saw them, and almost shrieked, but upon seeing her lord, her eyes just went wide and then she pointed up, towards the Hall.

With Bracken and Blackwood on point, leading the group through the corridors, Hermione didn't have much to do, quickly extinguishing her wand's tip once they left the kitchen. Torrhen kept beside her.

The first Lannister guard they came across was humming as he exited a side room, and had no time to warn anyone before Bracken was upon him, his sword slicing across the man's throat easily. The Lannister bubbled a bit, but Bracken caught him and dragged him into the room he came from quietly.

The next four soldiers met the same fate; the few Bracken maids and soldiers they came across aided them quietly, slipping the heavy-armoured Lannister soldiers into the adjoining rooms, or in one memorable occasion, the privy.

The walls of the keep were scorched in places, and there was a sense of rot where Bracken soldiers had run around carrying buckets of water to douse flames, as many support beams and columns around them were blackened or a darker brown colour, with bits of mould already growing on them. There were remnants of decorative horses galloping up and along the wood.

Hermione and Torrhen eased around one such column, while opposite them Blackwood and Bracken did so to another, and the two other Blackwood guards with them picked another.

They were peering from the shadows into a dark great hall. At the head, on a dais, was a blond-haired Lannister, laughing raucously with at least ten Lannister soldiers while three well-dressed teenage girls with miserable, terrified faces served them from flagons. One had light brown hair, the eldest by the looks of it, wearing a pretty pink gown; the other two had similar traits but darker brown hair, in soft buttercup yellow gowns.

At the foot of the dais were two teen boys in shackles; one, fair-haired, but not Lannister blond, with a pleasant face and wearing a tunic in the reversed house colours of Bracken, and the other with dark hair and a similar chin, also in the Bracken colours.

One guard reached forward and grabbed at the pink gown girls' bum as she passed by, making her squeal in surprise and horror. The fair-haired teen leapt to his feet, shouting, "Leave Barbara alone, you lion scum!"
A guard closer to the teen reached out and heavily struck him across the face with his armoured glove, and the teen collapsed to the hall floor, a dazed expression on his face, his mouth bloody and cheek red.

Barbara, the brown-haired teen in the pink dress, sobbed as the guard reached forward and manhandled her into his lap. "Whatchya gonna do about it, bastard?"

From behind the large column, Hermione saw red. Although the girl didn't look like her much, the light brown hair that bordered on blonde and the pretty pink dress reminded Hermione of Lavender. And when the guard shifted from having Barbara in his lap to pushing her back on the table, all Hermione saw was the broken and bloodied body of her old Gryffindor dorm mate, her throat ripped out from Fenrir Greyback's claws, her eyes vacant and body pale.

Without realizing it, Hermione stepped forward from the column, her wand in hand making an aborted swirl. *Fumos,* she thought furiously and smoke erupted from her wand, quickly filling the great hall in grey and obscuring the few torches that lit the space.

"What the-?"

"Where's the smoke coming from?"

"Intruders!"

"Swords out!"

Behind her, Hermione could sense Torrhen creeping along; he tapped her on her shoulder, and she glanced back. "*Where are they?*" he mouthed, jutting his chin forward and squinting in the smoke.

Hermione paused, Torrhen hovering behind her, and pointed her wand forward. With her other hand, she reached back and placed her hand in his, skin-on-skin. *Homenum Revelio,* she thought, and instantly, the Lannister guards, the three girls, and the two shackled boys lit up in red outlines.

Torrhen inhaled sharply, able to see what she saw. He glanced back down at her and nodded, a grim look on his face as he shifted his grip on his sword.

They inched forward towards the nearest Lannister; the guard had a sword against the darker-haired teen, eyes wide and panicked as they darted around the obscured room. He was shifting back every few steps, dragging the teen with him.

Torrhen snuck up behind and Hermione moved to the front. As Torrhen covered the man's mouth with his hand and slit his throat, Hermione murmured, "*Alohamora,*" and the shackles around the teen sprung free. His eyes were wide but Hermione held a finger to her lips and motioned him to the side, where he quickly disappeared into the smoke.

Meanwhile, noises from the other side of the table meant that Blackwood and Bracken had joined and were battling in the smoke with their guards; having now lost the element of surprise, directed a blast of wind from her wand to blow the smoke away.

Several Lannister guards were already dead, but so were the two Blackwood guards that came with them. They were still unevenly matched, especially with three unnamed girls and one still-shackled teen. Bracken rushed forward toward the table where the three girls were, a cry erupting from his mouth, while Blackwood cursed behind him, engaged in a sword fight with two Lannister guards.

Torrhen slashed at a nearby guard, engaging him but Hermione surveyed the room coolly and picked her target: the handsy Lannister. He stood with the girl plastered against his front, using her a human
The girl's sisters were under the table, crying loudly, but she was quiet, eyes wide and pale-faced, already at terms with her eventual death.

*I don't think so,* thought Hermione. She pointed her wand at the man, thought *expulso,* and as the girl was wretched from the Lannister's hands, both of them sailing in two different directions, Hermione immediately cast the cushioning charm on the floor where Barbara landed on her stomach with a soft *whump.* The Lannister guard, however, sailed through the air and hit one of the columns, snapping it in half. The heavy wooden beam then landed on top of him, and he lay unmoving.

Unfortunately, it brought attention to Hermione. Three other guards from the table turned to her direction, including one which seemed like the leader.

"Bitch!" he snarled, and together he and the two others hopped off the dais towards her.

Hermione narrowed her eyes and nonverbally cast *depulso,* and the very chairs they had sat on went flying towards them in a flurry of wood; one guard cried out as the chair broke against him and he fell to the floor. The other two managed to hack through the wooden chairs with their swords, but left piles of wooden bits behind.

*Oppugno,* Hermione thought, directing those pieces to the air and shot them towards the two men. The leader dove to the ground, eyes wide; the other was not as lucky and the wooden stakes found purchase between his armour, piercing the skin and jerking him back in tiny hits until he resembled a pin cushion.

"By the Gods," whispered the leader, but his words carried across the hall, "What are you?"

The man got to his knees and then feet, swinging his sword up at the same time and extending his reach to catch Hermione. She, however, cast a nonverbal *protego,* and the sword bounced off her invisible shield. With a slash towards the man, she cast *expulso,* and a bright blue light burst from her wand and slammed into the man's chest plate, dead center.

There was a *ding* as the spell impacted, visibly denting the steel in and making the man gasp out in pain. He was sent flying backwards, ass over head into the table and then over it as well. Hermione raced forward and looked over it, only to see the man dead, his neck at an odd angle.

"Lady Hermione! Behind you!" cried Torrhen, and Hermione turned to see one of the men Blackwood had been fighting had abandoned the Lord to engage her. His sword swung out but she dodged under it, only for the man to grab her right wrist from across his chest, her wand arm, and squeeze painfully.

Hermione cried out, her wand falling from her limp grip, and locked her knees to stop from falling to the floor. The bones of her wrist ground together and tears welled in her eyes.

*Conjunctivitis,* thought Hermione, gasping aloud as the soldier yanked her forward and off the dais, only to flail back as his eyes swelled up, blurry and pink. He let go of her and scrambled backwards, raising his hands to his face, crying, "I can't see! I can't see!"

Torrhen appeared behind the man and savagely stabbed and slashed him, and the Lannister guard fell to his knees, gurgling on his blood before falling face forward.

Silence descended on the hall, except for the faint sobs of the girls under the table. The other girl, Barbara, rose shakily from where she softly landed, eyes wide and mouth open as she took in the carnage in her home.

"Jeyne? Bess?" hoarsely called Bracken, dropping his sword with a loud clatter and inching towards
the table. The two girls, hearing their names, burst out from underneath, racing towards the Lord who swept them into his arms. "My girls, my little girls…!"

"Are they dead?" asked the teen still in shackles. He was near Hermione, at the base of the dais, so she crept forward on her knees and summoned her wand to her hand. It flew through the air and she caught it, wincing at the soreness of her wrist.

"Aye, lad, they are," answered Blackwood, nudging the one he had been fighting with his toe.

Hermione tapped the shackles and with an *alohamora*, they fell open. He absently rubbed the marks left behind and turned to survey the great hall, which showed the outcome of their battle.

"There are still a few more men outside," said another voice, and Hermione turned to see the first teen she had helped inch out from behind an upright column.

"Nothing we can't handle," said a confident Blackwood, glancing at Torrhen, who had blood splattered across his chest armour, neck and face. "Lady Hermione, can you still fight? Lord Bracken should remain inside with his children and rally the servants."

Torrhen grasped Hermione's upper arm and hauled her to her feet, and she nodded. "I'm fine."

"Good," the other Lord said, and then strode towards the end of the hall, Torrhen and Hermione quickly on his heels. As they passed through the main hall doors to the inner courtyard of Stone Hedge, Hermione heard one of the girls ask, "Who was that? Is she a woods witch?" and Bracken reply, "Something like that, my dove."

There was no rest though; Blackwood burst into the courtyard with a loud roar, catching the attention of the four guards on the ground by the large wooden door that led out of the keep, also half-burnt and rotted; the two archers above the battlements, who had been engaged in speaking to Brynden and Hoster Blackwood outside the keep, whirled on their heels to stare down at the three.

Hermione, however, ran straight for the wooden gate, ignoring the two men on either side who raised their swords.

"**BOMBARDA!**" she shouted, and the gate, whose doors normally swung inward, burst out in shards around the lock and iron hinges, one creaking as it slammed against the wall on the other side and bounced back, catching the unaware guard and sending him flying forward into the dirt. Torrhen was on the man immediately, bringing his sword straight down and punching through steel and flesh.

With the gate open, Brynden, Hoster and the Blackwood men with them on their horses raced in, their words flashing and the guard at the gate was cut down. Blackwood himself was on top of the battlement, Brynden on his heels after hopping off his horse, and the two men at the top were easily defeated.

In moments, it was over.

Hermione flicked her aching wrist and the wand slid back into her holster, leaving her hands free. She breathed heavily through her nose, her heart coming down from its gallop. She surveyed the courtyard, at the six dead bodies, shards of wood and blood splattered across the stone, and thought: *It's over. This is over. We did it.*

"Lady Hermione," said Torrhen quietly, coming up beside her. Hermione glanced up at him curiously. He gestured at her hand. "Your wrist, milady. Are you badly hurt?"

Hermione looked down, spotting the bruises that were already forming a black ring around the
delicate joint. "I - I'll be fine, Torrhen. Nothing a little Essence of Dittany can't cure."

The older man looked skeptically at her, but nodded. "If you say so, Lady Hermione…"

"Lady Hermione!" cried Blackwood, turning from where he stood with his sons. His face was bright and open, a grin stretching across his face - he looked beyond ecstatic for someone covered in blood and sweat. "Your magic is quite impressive!"

"I agree," added Lord Bracken as he stepped outside, the younger children all following him; the two youngest girls, in particular, kept close to his side. "Without you, my son and nephew would be dead, and my daughters as well. I owe you more than I could ever repay."

Hermione shook her head, making to reply, but Bracken cut her off as he stepped up to her, cupping her shoulders with his hands. "Please," he said, his voice low and pained, "Barbara was… badly hurt by the Mountain and my girls were terrified of the Lannister bastards that remained. It may not seem like much for you, having such amazing abilities, but it means much to us. You will always be welcomed in Stone Hedge, Lady Hermione."

"Aye, and Raventree Hall," boomed Blackwood, eyeing Bracken. Indecision warred on his face for a moment, dimming his smile to solemn. He extended a hand. "Bracken - Jonos - shall we - that is, shall we end this fight? Once and for all? We are not our ancestors."

Bracken eyed Blackwood warily, looking from the hand to the man a few times, but he then nodded slowly. "Aye. Aye - it is time. There are bigger fights than that of the Brackens and Blackwoods."

They shook hands, clasping each other's wrists tightly. Behind Blackwood, Hoster beamed, and one of the girls behind Bracken eyed the tall, gangly teen speculatively.

It was a historic moment - after hundreds of years, the Blackwoods and Brackens were putting aside their feud for a greater fight; but the day wasn't over yet, and Hermione needed to remind them of it. "I still need to ward Stone Hedge," she said, drawing their attention, "And then Edmure needs us."

Blackwood sighed. "Then let us complete this and head back - we've already spent more time here than we had planned."

Bracken agreed, sending his son - Harry Rivers - to find a map of Stone Hedge, and Hermione spent the time etching the same runes on the corners of the keep, with Torrhen trailing behind her. Blackwood, Bracken, and his nephew, Hendry, as well as Brynden and Hoster and the Blackwood men, began to clean the courtyard and move the dead Lannister bodies.

Within the hour, they were done and Hermione was exhausted, swaying slightly as the events of the day began to take their toll. It had been almost a year since she had used so much magic in such a short period of time, and like all muscles, she had to build her tolerance back up.

"Come, Lady Hermione," said Torrhen quietly, nudging her as she swayed into his shoulder, "Can you… ah, what is it? Ap-par-rate us back to High Heart?"

Hermione swallowed and straightened, running a hand through her tangled curls. "Ah - yes, I think so."

As Blackwood gave last orders to his son, and Hermione mentally prepared herself for three jumps. Barbara, the eldest Bracken girl, approached Hermione quietly, eyeing Torrhen who stood behind her. The Karstark moved back slightly, and Barbara eased forward, a cup in her hands.

"Thank you," the girl said quietly, and Hermione took the drink, sighing into the cup of mead. "They
she shuddered and there was a haunted look in her eyes that Hermione didn't like. "Just - thank you, Lady Hermione."

"You'll be safe now," whispered Hermione, firmly. She reached out with her free hand and caught the sleeve of Barbara's gown. "You will. You'll be safe inside these walls, I promise."

The other girl smiled, and then looked down, taking the cup and backing up several steps until she was standing with her sisters, half-brother, and cousin.

Then Blackwood and Bracken were with Hermione, the Lord of Stone Hedge saying, "let's go," and Hermione decided to push her magic, reaching out and grabbing the two Lords on either side of her. Torrhen looped an arm around Hermione's waist and then, with a pop, they were gone.

They reappeared where they left the horses, the shadows in the forest around High heart lengthening and deepening as the sun sank in the west. One horse - Bracken's - nervously whinied, but calmed as the man soothed it.

Hermione, however, felt whatever energy she had left plummet. She had expanded too much, too quickly, unable to build herself up over time or surround herself with the ambient magic of Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, or even the Burrow. She swayed, and then Torrhen was lifting her onto their horse.

"Here we go, Lady Hermione," he muttered, and she didn't even notice as the three men turned their horses as one, galloping down the side of the hill and around its curve, away from Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge, as her head bobbed back and then forward, and she slipped into unconsciousness.

TBC
I:VIII

Chapter Notes

Note: I made a bit of a gaff with the timeline of the story. After Robb's coronation, he sits at Riverrun for approximately five months before the Battle of Oxcross. In this story, he waited all of two weeks and then went charging. So - let's just say that's all been moved up. He'll have downtime now, after all, he's been injured!

the Winter Witch VIII

Hermione's unexpected "nap" gave her time to rejuvenate - albeit, not much - for the first couple of hours of their journey. Although Edmure had men making token forts along the Red Fork north of them, he was sure that the majority of the fighting would be further south, nearer to Riverrun and the Stone Mill, as they were closer to the riverlands and westerlands border between the Tullys and the Lannisters. Tywin's force would have eased south from Harrenhal and then swung up and around towards Riverrun, the largest opposing force accessible, especially given that Robb's army was beyond their reach over a mountain range.

As such, Hermione swung into consciousness, only to find that she was lying on hard, unyielding ground. It was so reminiscent of her time on the run with Harry and Ron that the fog clogging her brain and the visceral fear those memories evoked, had her confused, especially as she stared into the warm and crackling fire in front of her.

A shape moved towards her, and Hermione pushed herself up on her hands, muttering, "Harry? Is it my turn for the watch? Give the locket here, then - it's my turn to wear the damn thing."

"Why, Lady Hermione," the figure teased, and she frowned as Harry never called her 'Lady Hermione', "Say that in front of my father and he'll definitely think you're sweet on me."

"Father?" thought Hermione, frowning heavily. *Harry's father is dead…*

Hermione almost jumped up, brandishing her wand to attack the man, but then the memories came: walking through the Forbidden Forest, ending up in Westeros; Robb, his coronation, and meeting the Northern army; Torrhen -

"Torrhen," said Hermione, softly. "I'm sorry - I thought you were someone else for a moment, there."

"Aye, this Harry," he continued to tease, his shape taking form from the dark as he crouched low in front of her and to the side of the fire, so she was able to make out his square jaw and hulking shoulders. "Is there competition for your heart, my lady?"

A loud snort from the other side of the fire had Hermione peering. Both Lord Bracken and Lord Blackwood were roasting some small mammals - likely squirrels or rabbit - on a makeshift spit. She had been unconscious longer than she thought.
"Karstark," began Blackwood, "If your father thinks he can broker a marriage deal for you or your brothers with Lady Hermione, he's delusional."

*Quite right, too,* thought Hermione happily, finally glad someone was on her side. Her hopes were quickly dashed when the man continued, "If Lady Hermione even gave the slightest inclination she was interested, I'd be joining the discussion and parading Brynden or Lucas in front of her in a moment's notice."

Hermione scowled deeply and Bracken laughed, while Torrhen crossed his arms and sat cross-legged on the ground just by Hermione's feet.

"Lady Hermione loves me best," the young man said petulantly.

"Only on Tuesdays and Wednesdays," quipped Hermione, rolling her eyes and sitting up properly. She gingerly took the hot slice of meat Bracken passed her with his dagger.

Torrhen muttering something under his breath, something Hermione couldn't make out, but was *sure* had mentioned Robb in it.

"Lady Hermione, what was this locket you mentioned?" asked Bracken, as he reached for one of the cooked meats in front of him, only to hiss and bring his fingers to his mouth as the juices spit. "And who is Harry?"

Hermione shifted, chewing thoughtfully before answering. "Harry's my best friend- practically my brother. We met when we were both starting at Hogwarts and were sorted into Gryffindor together."

"Gryffindor?" asked Blackwood, attempting the strange word carefully.

"Hogwarts has four houses that students are sorted into based on their personalities, or preference," she lectured, absently licking the juice from her own slice of meat off her thumb. "Hufflepuff for the loyal and hardworking; Ravenclaw for the bookish and logical; Slytherin for the cunning and ambitious; and my house, Gryffindor: for the brave and daring."

"Well, you certainly are brave and daring," complimented Bracken, handing her another sliver of meat.

"Thanks," replied Hermione, for both the words and dinner; "But the Hat originally wanted me for Ravenclaw."

"Hat?" echoed Torrhen.

Hermione nodded. "We were sorted by the magical hat that had the ability to look into someone's mind - and soul, I suppose - and best place you based on your current personality and your hopes and fears. It is meant to help you grow as a person, but there are limitations of course. Who you are at eleven is not who you are at seventeen, for example. And given that we fought a war, we had to adapt and change in order to survive."

"How did you become involved in such a war?" asked Blackwood, just as Bracken on his other side muttered something rudely about people not taking care of their women.

"I became Harry's friend," said Hermione with a shrug. "His parents were murdered when he was one by a dark wizard - Voldemort - and when he tried to kill Harry, it didn't work. That made Harry enemy number one, and by default, I became part of that. I was smart, and loyal, and I helped Harry in tricky situations and was at his side for all his adventures. It didn't help that our war was based on blood."
"Blood?" all three men made confused faces, but it was Bracken who voiced it.

Hermione glanced at Torrhen, who was frowning and staring intently at the fire. She cleared her throat. "In the magical world, there were those who were born to witches and wizards; if they could trace their family line back several generations, they were considered pureblood. Someone with a one magical parent was a halfblood, and then there was me: someone born to two people without magic. I'm a Muggleborn, or insultingly, a Mudblood."

Indecision warred within her for a moment, but she realized she wanted these men to know about her and her past; she wanted them to see she was capable and strong, and that she was more than magic and books but strong in her own right. She withstood torture at the hands of a madwoman, and their understanding of the world where women were ornaments, unless a Mormont, wasn't fair or accurate.

She rolled up the sleeve of her sweater on her left arm and held it out in such a way that the carved lines from Bellatrix's cursed dagger were visible in the firelight. The scarred word *Mudblood* was still raised and puckered, an angry red against the pale of her skin, as though it was just carved days ago instead of a year.

Blackwood was staring at her arm in horror, while Bracken had angrily spat out a curse Hermione didn't recognize; but it was Torrhen's furious face that stopped her from speaking, "oh, it's fine, it happened a year ago, it doesn't hurt anymore," in a flippant manner.

"Who? How?" the young man, whom Hermione was beginning to regard as a friend, growled out.

Hermione turned away from the men partially, curling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them in a loose hug as she stared into the flame. "We made a mistake. We were on the run, fugitives, and Harry tripped the taboo. We were hunted down and caught by Snatchers, and they took us to Malfoy Manor."

The words were soft, almost rote by the way she repeated it, as though she had said the story before and more than once or twice. Her eyes took on a glazed appearance, lost in the haze of memories.

"Ron and Harry were taken to the dungeons, and they kept me in the drawing room. Bellatrix thought I'd be easier to break because of my diluted and impure blood, that I'd be the loose link that would answer her questions. She tortured me, and when that didn't work, she used a cursed dagger to remind me of what I'd always be - a Mudblood."

But then Hermione turned to the men, a small smile on her face. "I didn't break, though. Lied under torture, and this scar? All it does is remind me every day just how strong I am, what I am capable of, and what I survived."

Her words rang strong with truth and conviction, and it was enough that the three men with her did not say anything. Instead, Blackwood and Bracken began discussing joint hunting and raiding parties their now-allied houses could conduct to keep Lannisters off their lands, speaking in very loud voices. Torrhen's jaw worked, and Hermione reached out to touch his shoulder. He jerked, then looked at her.

"You okay?" she asked quietly.

The angry look on his face melted to a wry one. "I dislike the idea of you in danger, Lady Hermione, even more so that I was unable to prevent such danger to you."

"It happened a year ago," she pointed out.
He shook his head. "Still. I promised King Robb to protect you where I could, and I feel like I let you down, somehow." When she opened her mouth to refute that, he grinned. "I know - I know - but… it doesn't change how I feel." He then nudged his shoulder into hers, nearly sending her sprawling in the opposite direction. He laughed. "I guess you'll have to remain out of trouble from now on."

Hermione grumbled something uncomplimentary and he laughed again.

As the evening wore on, Blackwood suggested taking first watch, with Bracken after him, and then Torrhen. Hermione put up a token effort to be included, but was shot down with a forceful response that she was still recovering from her magical use. While not fully true, it was true enough to some degree that she didn't put up a sight, and quickly fell asleep.

They were all up at the crack of dawn the next morning, just as the sun's golden rays began to spread across the farmland. There was still a hard day's ride ahead of them, and Hermione was beginning to chafe on the idea of being on horseback for another day of travel.

As she was staring contemplatively at the three horses, Blackwood approached her. "Copper for your thoughts?"

"I was just wondering if I can stupefy the horses and we just Side-Along back to Stone Mill," sighed Hermione.

"What is this - stoo-puh-fi?" asked Blackwood curiously.

"It knocks someone unconscious," called Torrhen from where he was finishing packing up his bedroll. "Right, Lady Hermione? It's what you used on the Kingslayer when -" he stopped and unconsciously ran a hand across his neck, where there was a faint line from the wound she healed.

Hermione nodded. "That's it," she said, without calling attention to the near-miss her friend had.

"Will it harm the horses?" asked Bracken nervously; a fair point, given that the man's sigil was a horse.

"Not at all."

"And it'll save us time?" asked Blackwood, rubbing his rough beard close to the chin.

Again, Hermione nodded.

"Well, I see no harm in it," concluded Bracken, casting his vote. The other three men agreed, and Hermione brandished her wand, pointing it at the three horses who looked back passively. She quickly cast four spells in succession: a cushioning charm on the ground, so that when the horses fell they didn't break their legs; and then three stupefys to knock them out.

Once done, the four stared at the horses and Torrhen asked the obvious question: "Well. Now what?"

Feeling sheepish, because there was no way they would be able to Apparate with three fully-grown horses as well, Hermione did an animal-to-object transfiguration and turned the three horses into small, hand-sized toy horses instead, each mimicking the features of their real counterparts. She tucked them in her beaded bag and said, with a flourish, "Voila! Now we can go."

Bracken shook his head, but he and Blackwood took their places next to Hermione like they had the previous night, with Torrhen behind her.
"I'm never going to get used to this," muttered Blackwood.

"Oh, it's really not so bad," said Bracken in response with a grin, as he was the only one of the three to not get sick when Apparating.

Blackwood's retort was left in the air as they displaced space, arriving at the Stone Mill with a loud crack.

However, the noise of their arrival was masked by the shouts and screams of the men around them, as they had appeared in the middle of a battle.

Brynden Tully, also known as the Blackfish, was worried. oh, he tried to not let it show, of course; he wasn't biting his nails or wringing his hands like some milkmaid. But he was pacing a role in the rug in front of the fireplace of the room he was in, hands clasped behind his back when they weren't aggressively stroking his beard.

Things had been going so well, he thought darkly. Of course; of course here was when things went wrong.

Things weren't necessarily wrong, either - but they weren't looking good. Initially, after the siege of the Crag, once King Robb awoke after having the arrow pushed through the wound and a poutrice then slathered on top of it, the young Wolf commanded the army to station themselves in and around the ruins of the Westerling household.

There were holes in the ceiling to fix, wounds to be treated, and the dead to bury. And the King handled that admirably. He even handled the bitter Rolf Spicer, castellan of the Crag, and his sister, Lady Westerling, with deftness and grace. They were even able to hold a brief meeting of all the commanders at the Crag, and through the communications parchment that Lady Hermione made, with the others who took the other Lannister keeps. They were even requesting more information about Bran and Rickon from Riverrun; however, Edmure was surprisingly silent, which was a cause for concern.

And the Blackfish went to bed that night thinking everything was wonderful and they would soon return to Riverrun victorious, that they would return to Riverrun shortly and deal with his idiotic nephew.

Except Olyvar Frey, Robb's squire, couldn't wake him up the next day.

The Maester of the Crag, a wizened, crotchety old man, took one look at their feverish King and said that his arrow wound was infected. And as sweat gleaned on the Young Wolf's bare torso as his squire brought wet rag after wet rag to cool his liege lord down, Brynden only had one thought: this is not going to go well.

Two days later, Robb's fever hadn't broke, and his Kingsguard, as well as Lord Umber and Lord Bolton, were ensconced in the room they had commandeered for their King. It was a tight fit, but Olyvar and Eddard Karstark were running medical interference, while Daryn Hornwood and Dacey Mormont stood just inside the doors to the chamber; two other Kingsguards members, Lucas Blackwood and Peter Mallister, stood outside.

Umber, Bolton, and the Blackfish stood by the fireplace opposite the bed, braving the heat and sweat that trickled down their spines. Outside, the moon was high in the sky and a few stars blinked in and out of focus as clouds swept across them. They were nearing three days without change, and they were getting desperate.
On the bed, Robb moaned and writhed in pain, his face already a pale white. His Tully-lent hair, a deep auburn, stood out in stark contrast, and was plastered to his head in a sticky, sweaty mess.

"We need to do something," hissed the Greatjon, although his version of a whisper was speaking normally for everyone else.

"Like what?" countered Bolton, eyes firmly on his King while he had his arms folded as he leaned against back in his seat at a table. "We've tried what medicinal herbs we had on hand; even Lady Westerling's daughter has brought stuff."

Brynden shook his head. "I don't trust the very family we've essentially imprisoned by successfully taking their home."

"Hornwood's taste-testing everything," assured Bolton, glancing at the man who stood stiff and straight at the door. The tall brown-haired man with square jaw covered in day-old stubble was made of stone in the way he kept sentry.

From the bed, Robb groaned, "Bran. Rickon."

"We need more information for his Grace," countered Umber.

"I would like to know about my nephews, too," argued Brynden darkly, "But my King will need to actually be awake to hear the news to begin with! He needs to heal. He needs a better Maester!"

"There is no one," argued back Umber, eyes flashing. "That useless corpse here would rather see him die than help, and if we send for one, it'll take them days - if not a week or longer! - to get here from Riverrun."

"And news from Riverrun is quiet now," sighed Bolton, drumming his fingers on the tabletop. "They are probably engaged in battle as we speak."

A knock on the door had everyone turn to it in unison. It creaked open and Lucas Blackwood, the second son to Lord Blackwood, a tall but lean young man of black hair poked his head in. "Beginning your pardon, my Lords - Lady Jeyne is here with some more herbs and concoctions for his Grace."

There was some grumbling, but Hornwood opened the door and the small, timid girl slipped in, her eyes darting from one man to the next nervously. She was a mousy but pretty thing, noted Brynden, skinny to the point of boney but with thick brown hair that she kept tucked over one shoulder.

She eased to the seat next to the King's bed, while Olyvar Frey hovered like an anxious mother, eyeing each and every bottle she lifted from the tray she carried in.

"What's that?" the squire asked suspiciously, pointing to each one.

Hornwood strode forward and Lady Jeyne allowed drops of each to fall onto his tongue with a stopper she brought. After several minutes with no ill effects, the group in the room collectively relaxed - only a bit, though.

Lady Jeyne began first by probing the festering wound, causing pus to escape and Robb to groan on the bed. Brynden grit his teeth and flexed his hand around the handle of his blade. She removed the dressings and then bathed the wound first, before putting a poultice mixture on top of it, then redressing.

Bolton was watching her carefully, and his eyes slid from the young girl to his King when Robb
seemed to settle a bit.

Lady Jeyne curtseyed to the men as she gathered her supplies, and left as silently as she entered. Bolton's eyes narrowed after her.

"What are you thinking?" rumbled Brynden, having been watching him.

"I think," said Bolton softly, which was at his normal volume, but this time it carried gravitas, "That we should send a message on the parchment to Lady Hermione."

"Oh?" asked Brynden with a scoff. "And what could Lady Hermione do that none of us can?"

Umber sighed noisily and Bolton turned to Brynden with a cool look in his eyes. "She's a witch, Blackfish. I'm certain that she's more than capable of healing our King given that she saved Torrhen Karstark from bleeding out when the Kingslayer slashed his throat open."

Brynden's mouth dropped open at the slight rebuke, his eyes darting to Daryn Hornwood, who had been in the clearing during that battle, who nodded.

The large Tully sighed, running his hands over his hair but nodded reluctantly. "Fine. Write her. And for the God's sake, I hope she's near that parchment and can come soon."

________________________

Chaos. It was pure chaos.

Torrhen shouted something in Hermione's face, and then he shoved her behind him, bringing his sword up and deflecting a stray arrow.

Blackwood and Bracken had already taken off - both in different directions - and were lost in the melee of bodies in various armour - some shiny in steel, and others, in the boiled leathers than the northern army preferred. The noise was loud, filled with shouts and screams and the clang of steel hitting steel.

Hermione crouched, hands over her ears as she squeezed her eyes shut. This was nothing like the Battle of Hogwarts - this was something altogether different. The Battle of Hogwarts had been loud and chaotic, yes, but it was with the shout of spellfire and flashes of light that one had to duck under or avoid. They were racing up and down castle stairwells and hallways, or ducking into classrooms for a breather while Death Eaters paced up and down the corridors.

Magical battles were often conducted standing still, side-faced and waving wands; Torrhen, in front of her, was moving back and forth, sideways, hacking and slashing at any opponents who chose to challenge him, sliding to face sideways one moment and then bracing his shoulders forward the next for a downward slash.

His sword was bright red minutes later, sweat already trickling down the side of his face and into the collar of his black leathers. He turned around and leaned down, hauling Hermione to her feet. He tucked her protectively close to his left side.

"We need to get you to safety!" he shouted, bringing his right arm up to block at a man in red bearing down at them.

Hermione, eyes wide, watched as he stabbed the man through, yanking his sword out quickly - so quickly that blood splattered forward onto his leathers and neck and some hit Hermione as well.

Time seemed to slow. Hermione was only aware of the furious pounding of her own heart as she
stared around her, watching her friend defend her as they began to retreat towards the Stone Mill, which stood as a beacon above all the fighting, the sigil of the Tullys - a trout - flying proudly in a soft wind.

Torrhen cursed, and Hermione saw him scoop up someone's discarded shield and he rammed forward, into an oncoming opponent, shoving the man back a few feet. His eyes were on his enemy, leaving Hermione standing shell shocked on the muddy - and bloody - uneven field.

Someone was screaming, and Hermione turned to see a man coming towards her, eyes and mouth wide, his face already covered in blood and other matter. For a moment, she just stood there. And then -

"Reducto!"

The man went flying back, his armour taking the hit but not without severe injury: the steel had punctured in, leaving a large gaping wound that had shattered and pulverized his chest cavity inward.

Sound came rushing back to Hermione, and she spun, eyes seeking out Torrhen. He had abandoned the shield and was fighting sword-to-sword with a Lannister, but another two were moving towards him.

Hermione branished her wand, and focusing narrowing on the armour just above their chest plates, a spot she was familiar with due to Torrhen's own wound, she thought viciously, *diffindo*, jabbing her wand in one man's direction first, and then the next. A flash of pale light erupted from her wand, and slashed thinly across their throats cleanly.

They fell to the ground like puppets cut from their string.

Torrhen, having defeated his opponent, turned on his boots to face Hermione, eyes wide and horrified, trying to find her in the crowd.

"My Lady!" he dodged under a flying sword and then punched another as he ran to her side. "We need to go!"

Hermione shook her head. "We need to help!"

"How?"

Hermione turned, completely expecting her friend to watch her back in case any other soldiers came up to them. She surveyed the field, but her height wasn't conductive to seeing over towering knights and lords, especially once they were mixed with their enemies. Behind her, the Stone Mill towered over everything; at the top was a small ledge: barely two feet, but it ran along the top dome.

Hermione swallowed.

Torrhen, at her side, breathed heavily, almost panting in exertion, and followed her gaze. His small brown eyes went hard, and then narrowed into slits as he whipped his head back around to her. "No, Lady Hermione! I swear to the Old Gods if you-!"

But Hermione had no idea what he swore, as she disapparated with a pop, lost in the noise of the battle, and reappeared on that small ledge. Her weight overbalanced and she shot a sticking charm to her feet and then swung herself forward to hug the rough stones of the domed top of the Mill.

Once she was sure of herself, she undid the sticking charm and slowly twisted on the small ledge, looking over the landscape. Behind her, the wide and churning Red Fork rushed by; the mill itself
stretched across the bank, using the kinetic motion of the water beneath to power the mill's blades.

The river wound straight south, and opposite, north, Hermione could see the faint outline of Riverrun on what she knew was the three-way break of the river: one to go south, where they were now; one west turning into the Tumblestones towards the mountains; and another east from Riverrun, leading to the main mouth of the Trident.

Facing south, the battle was spread over a large parcel of what was once farmland backed on gently rolling green hills, sparsely decorated with large fir and coniferous trees. Those tiny mini forests were bracketed in by half-walls of stone and wood, too densely packed for any other purpose that to serve as visual markers to break up the farming areas. Now, however, they were used to hide archers.

Ahead, coming up from the south, Hermione could see the swarm of crimson and gold, large banners flying a proud lion in the distance on a hill that overlooked the battle, opposite the river. On this side of the Red Fork, the land sloped down into plains whereas on the other side, the land rose to form a natural, steep bank. On that bank were several small wooden fortifications, tiny watch towers on stilts with Tully and Tully-allied archers.

It only took a moment to categorize it all, but Hermione could easily see that they were outnumbered. Severely outnumbered.

*I need to do damage,* she thought, *but in the best place possible.*

She peered ahead, towards that hill where several men sat on their horses, immovable figures overlooking the carnage below and framed by the flying lions. Instinctively, she knew that one of those men was Tywin Lannister.

While she *could* Apparate over, Hermione was unsure if that was the best direction at the moment; she plan was still to return home, and announcing her abilities as a witch would put a target on her back. Even though many in Robb's army was aware of her status as a witch, few knew her capabilities or doubted what Eddard or Torrhen Karstark had accidentally blurted out. If she couldn't return home, her magical abilities were the only thing she had that gave her an advantage over others in this world.

Also - what would she *do* with Tywin Lannister if she even knew which man it was? Stun him and take him captive? And hold him at Riverrun? That would only encourage his bannermen to attack viciously and with Robb's portion of the army elsewhere, Hermione wasn't sure even her wards could hold against such a dedicated force.

No, she decided, eyes narrowed on a marching foot relief unit that was coming up along the river towards the main battle, which was beginning to thin out - with the crimson and gold winning. *That won't do.*

With a deep breath, as she still had not recovered fully from yesterday's warding of two keeps, the battle at Stone Hedge, nor the Side-Along she conducted, Hermione centered herself and pointed her wand at the bank of the river, eyes closed as she concentrated.

She visualized what she wanted her spell to do - as that was half the way magic worked, on intent - and murmured her spell. "Glacius."

From the tip of her wand, a blue light quickly burst in a flurry of snowflakes as the air around her from above instantly plummeted - after all, warm air rose, but cold air fell rapidly to the earth.

The strong breeze raced across the battlefield, and almost immediately Hermione saw the results as
the men still fighting began to shiver and their breath misted in front of them. Those lying still on the ground soon were covered with frost. There was confusion on the ground as the southern Lords were unable to understand what happened - while the Northern army, and some Riverlands men - were able to shake off the cold far quicker and take advantage of their enemies' pause.

The gust of wind then hit the Red Fork, and instantly the water began to freeze over. Once it solidified to what Hermione needed, she then cut the spell.

"Bombarda Maxima!" she shouted, clutching the side of the mill as she jabbed at the frozen river in the distance, watching the ice crack and then break into a multiple of a hundred little sharp pieces. "Oppugno!"

The tiny shards of ice rose in the air and with a flick of Hermione's wand for direction, she sent them towards the Lannister relief soldiers. Still confused at the sudden drop in temperature, they had no time to notice the icicles, but they certainly heard the cries of pain as they punctured through flesh and in between the armour, riddling the men with the shards.

From her vantage point, Hermione watched, slightly sickened, at the destruction she caused with her spells as the entire unit fell to the ground, and those closest to the river turned it red with their blood.

However, without the relief, and in conjunction with the cold air, the battle turned in the favour of the Tullys and their men, and they quickly overwhelmed those who remained. As the line progressed closer and closer to the hill the Lannister leaders were, one man simply turned his horse and left.

That was the sign for the others, and they too, followed the first man on horseback, and then a horn was blown and call went out; immediately, those closest to the hill, at the rear of the Lannister force, began to straggle backwards, and then soon the entire force - whatever was left of it - began a retreat.

They moved quickly, and from her spot, Hermione saw them begin their march southeast, towards the hills. She let out a silent sigh of relief, and Apparated down to the field below, focusing on Torrhen.

usually she wasn't able to blind Apparate to a person, but she was familiar enough with Torrhen now that she could find him easily, and popped into existence next to him as he was walking the battlefield angrily, taking his emotions out on crimson and gold soldiers who remained behind, too injured to move or near death.

He swore loudly when she appeared, jumping and blinding sending his sword flying, making Hermione duck low.

"Torrhen! Merlin!"

The tall man grimaced, his forehead wrinkled. Then, horror settled on his face as he realized what he had nearly done. "Lady Hermione!" he yelped.

"Hi," she replied wryly.

He glared at her, and then ushered her back in the direction she came from, towards the Stone Mill and where Edmure's command tents were set up. "You, my lady, are going to Lord Edmure and staying in the tent and not moving!"

Hermione wisely did not argue, allowing the taller man to maneuver her around bloody bodies and churned ground, until they reached the command tent flying the Tully banner of a trout. Edmure was already inside, covered in dirt, grime, and blood, but had a beaming smile on his face as Lord Blackwood, Mallister, and Bracken all congratulated him on sending Tywin's forces back south.
"I saw that the Mountain was here," Lord Blackwood was saying as Hermione and Torrhen entered. "What became of him?"

"Peppered with arrows like a hedgehog," crowed Edmure happily. "We held the west bank of the river, and he lost more than two-thirds of his men attempting to cross the Mill, coming across our reserves hidden away with Lady Hermione's magic, and I faced him to a standstill until the retreat was sounded!"

"Well, I doubt it was a standstill," interjected Mallister with infinite kindness and patience, "But you did well enough against a man that normally would crush anyone else."

Hermione sidled up in the space that Bracken made for her at the table. Edmure nodded in her direction and continued, "Overall, our numbers stand at two-hundred and eighty lost. Our defense of the archers in the forts and trees on the west side of the river helped keep the majority of the Lannister forces from crossing."

"The same happened near Riverrun where Lord Vance had command," reported Bracken, reading from their communication parchment.

"Our reports are coming in, slowly, but by the sound of it, Ser Marchbrand was soundly routed several times where he attempted to breech our forts," continued Bracken, eyes on the parchment in front of him, absently moving his finger to point at the areas where these people were on the map on the table. "Ser Crakehall is now a captive of ours and currently being treated for his injuries, while we have confirmation that Lord Leo Lefford and Robert Brax are both dead."

"There was one point here where I was worried," admitted Edmure, running a hand over his auburn hair, glancing at Hermione, "But when that northern gust of wind came - well -"

"Aye," agreed Blackwood happily, also looking at Hermione. "It seems our Winter Witch is living up to her name!"

Hermione blanched, having not realized that her actions would reinforce the stupid name Karstark had given her at Robb's coronation. She swallowed and said, a bit snipily, "I saw the Lannister army moving southeast. Do we know what's that way?"

"Well, not our King," said Edmure, almost flippantly, "Which is the important thing. Tywin can't move back towards Casterly Rock for reinforcements."

Blackwood, however, frowned. "We should look into this, though. Lady Hermione makes a good point: the Old Lion was moving with purpose and reason, so he had a backup plan. We need to know what it was."

All fell silent as they contemplated how they were going to manage that.

"A problem for another day," finally said Edmure slowly. "We won these past two days of fighting, and the men deserve to enjoy themselves and our victory. We can get started on figuring out where Tywin Lannister disappeared to shortly."

There were some grumbles, but Edmure ordered Bracken inform Vance to make his way back to Riverrun to regroup, leaving only token forces behind in case of Lannister retaliation, and both Blackwood and Bracken offered their homes of Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge as home bases.

"Well, if that's all you need," began Hermione, brushing her palms on her jeans absently, "Then I have three horses to transfigure back and wake."
Torrhen laughed at Edmure's confused look, and Bracken and Blackwood shared a smile. Bracken turned back to the parchment, his stylus dipped in ink as he wrote the orders on Edmure's behalf.

However, as he wrote, other words formed on the parchment, swirling, and then Bracken's face, as he read, morphed into horror.

"What? What is it?" demanded Edmure, seeing it. "Is it Riverrun? Father? What?"

Blackwood reached out and grabbed the man's shoulder. "Jonos - speak!"

The Lord's eyes turned to Hermione, of all the people in the tent. "It's King Robb. He's taken an arrow and the wound is festering."

Horror spread through Hermione's veins as they turned to ice. She felt dizzy and Bracken's next words seemed to come from a far distance: "They - that is - the Blackfish - the Kingsguard - they're asking for Lady Hermione's help. Immediately."

The tent pin pricked to a tiny point in her vision. Hermione took a moment to glance at Torrhen, who looked at wretched as her, but he gave her the tiniest of nods. With the loudest crack yet, Hermione blind Apprated to Robb, in a place she had never been before, hoping she wouldn't splinch herself.

_Hang on, Robb, she thought, I'm coming!_

____________________________

TBC
Robb's line, "What I want, and what I need to do, are two very different things" is a paraphrase to one of my favourite all-time lines in the 100, when Bellamy says "Who we are, and who we need to survive, are two very different things."

For Robb, there was no indication that time passed. One minute, he was slipping into the bed Lady Spicer had shown him to, Olyvar following dutifully behind him, and then he was sucked into his dreams - strange dreams.

He was back at Winterfell, standing in the inner courtyard while next to his horse. Jon stood behind him, looking solemn as usual with his black curly hair and long pale face; always looking more like Eddard Stark than Robb did, but Robb never cared. He wore black boiled leathers and a black fur coat over top, a sword belt around his waist and thick boots tucked into his trousers, all signs of the coming winter and the temperature difference at the Wall.

"Next time I see you, you'll be all in black," he joked, although his heart ached at seeing his half-brother feel so unwelcome at Winterfell that he would run at the first chance he got to be somewhere else, to belong somewhere else.

"It always was my colour," quipped Jon back, a tiny smile breaking his serious visage and warming his eyes.

Robb grinned back and his arms extended around his brother, pulling him tight against his chest for a moment while he savoured the feeling of being with blood. He thumped him on the back goodnaturedly, and then stepped back.

"No! No! Robb railed in his mind. Don't let go! You need him! You need Jon at your side! He's the brother that didn't abandon you! That didn't betray you!"

The inner courtyard of Winterfell disappeared and then he was in the Godswood, at the base of the ancient Heart tree, staring up at its thin blood-red leaves that swayed in a gentle summer breeze, the rustling of those leaves blending into a calming song that paired with the bubbles from the pool next to the tree.

The face on the Heart tree stared into Robb and he shifted his eyes away to light on a figure who sat on a low boulder, its edges worn smooth after hundreds of years of other's behinds carving their mark into the granite. His face was hunched over his Valyrian blade, Ice, as he ran a bloodied cloth over and over the gleaming metal, cleaning it.

"Aren't you going to sit, Robb?"

Robb did so, gingerly. His father was dead.

"You have quite the task in front of you," he continued, turning back to his sword, spinning it by the
handle to see the other side of the blade. "You've called the banners, rallied the North and Riverlands to your side and yet you are unfulfilled. Why?"

"You know why," mumbled Robb, looking at his hands in his lap. He curled them into fists. "I want to avenge you."

Ned nodded. His voice was calm when he asked, "And have you?"

"Not yet."

"How will you achieve this?"

"By continuing to raze the Lannister lands and take their castles and keeps," declared Robb hotly. "By making Tywin Lannister scurry from one battlefield to the next until he is too broken to continue."

"Will that bring me back?"

Pain lanced through Robb at the words. "Nothing will bring you back."

Ned turned to look at his son, straight in the eyes. "Exactly, Robb. Nothing will bring me back. You have a duty to your brothers and sisters, yes; to the North as well. But remember: Winter is Coming."

And then the Godswood was disappearing and Robb could only reach out and cry, "Father!" before he was in the Great Hall, sitting in his father's chair and Bran, in his chair with Hodor behind him, was at his side. He looked around the Hall in confusion, realizing that Luwin was staring at him.

"Lord Robb?" Luwin asked, and Robb blinked before realizing he was meant to be settling some dispute or another.

"I-" he broke off, shaking his head and wondering if it even mattered what he said; he was barely keeping his head above all his duties. Winning a battle was nothing compared to the delicate dance between small folk and their grievances and his Lords and their grievances and…

"I'll do it," offered Bran kindly, his young voice piping up from beside Robb.

Robb opened his mouth - Bran was too young, he couldn't rule Winterfell on his own - and then Rickon was racing through the Hall, wild and dirty and carefree with Shaggydog scrambling after him, his nails clicking against the stone and then Winterfell was burning - the fire was hot and bright and Robb squinted, wondering where his younger brothers went - why did he leave them alone in Winterfell to go south? WHY?

And then they too were gone in the flame and he cried out, loudly, "Bran! Rickon!" but no one answered.

"You're so stupid," a derisive feminine voice snorted, and Robb looked down to see Arya looking up at him, her long black hair pulled back into a braid and tucked into Bran's old tunic and trousers. She had a small, thin blade at her hip, held tightly in her left hand. They were somewhere grassy, the riverlands perhaps.

"Me? Stupid?" he replied, affronted. "Why?"

"You're a King, aren't you? You make the rules," said his youngest sister simply.
"I have to follow the rules more than anyone else," argued Robb, while another part of him wondered what rules they were arguing about.

Arya shook her head. "Rules are meant to be broken, especially if you want to break them."

"There are consequences, Arya!" snapped Robb.

She sighed. "Aren't there always?"

Then she turned and began walking away, leaving Robb gaping after her. "Wait - Arya, wait!" and he took a step forward to follow her but found himself in a large courtyard, a bubbling fountain of clear water in the middle with several blooming flowers that gave off a sweet scent.

A cool, thin feminine hand reached forward and slipped into the crook of his elbow. Robb startled and looked down, only to see two similar blue eyes look up at him. Wearing a pretty green dress with yellow trim, Sansa tilted her head to the side and let her long curly hair shift and gleam in the sunlight.

"Sansa," he sighed, eyes tracing over her delicate face for signs of harm. Although tired, she seemed fine.

"Your Grace," chirped Sansa, keeping to her teachings and politeness. "You're making enemies everywhere."

Robb sighed, and they began walking around the courtyard, down meandering paths that wormed under curling branches and leaves that created pockets for intimacy and past rose bushes. "I know."

"Do you?" his sister demurred, casting her eyes ahead of them and to the side. Robb followed her eyes and spotted a lithe shadowy figure behind a hedge. "The Lions grow desperate and angry, and a beast when cornered is not a beast you wish to face."

Robb hummed, and then Sansa nodded in a different direction towards a nearby tree. On several branches were different sigil ornaments of the various Great Houses in Westeros: a stag for the Baratheons, which was hanging precariously by a single thin thread; the Lion hung by a thick, red silk cord that was severely knotted in several places; the Wolf for his family was threadbare grey, one side of the cord badly frayed while the other seemed to have something white beginning to braid itself into the cord. Between them, and others, was a shimmering spider's web in the sunlight where a spider was weaving between multiple points, most predominantly the Targaryen dragon and the Martell sun of Dorne.

"Or perhaps you are aware of the story of the Spider and its web? Of shadow puppets and greed?"

Behind the tree, a thick ooze climbed like an aggressive fungus, its mould creeping along and into many of the branches where the sigils hung from; the Vale was entirely engulfed.

"Sansa," pleaded Robb. "What do I do? I can't let the Kingslayer go for you and Arya - I just can't, I'm sorry!"

Sansa shook her head and smiled gently at her older brother. "You'll figure it out."

And then the courtyard was empty, the fountain frozen over, frost thick on the ground turning the grass white and the leaves all gone from the branches in the trees around him. The house sigils froze over, crusting in blue and white until they became too heavy and snapped from the branches, landing on the frozen ground and cracking, splintering into tiny pieces.
Robb's breath misted and he shivered. Something was watching him.

He spun in tight circles, eyes peering past bare trees into the bushes and hedges, hearing only the hiss of the wind and a creaking noise; or was it something rattling?

Robb exhaled slowly, his breath forming a cloud in front of his face, and then when it was gone, he saw nothing but two, vivid blue eyes - he scrambled backwards with a yell on his lips and -

"My lord!"

Robb's chest burned and he could barely move his left shoulder, the agony sharp and hot as it pierced through his brain. He squeezed his eyes shut and breathed heavily in through his open mouth.

"My lord, please," a soft, feminine voice said, and cool hands stretched across his chest to urge him to lie back down, "Please rest - you'll tear your stitches."

"H'mione?" he slurred, allowing himself to be guided back to the bed, turning his head towards the voice. Lady Hermione doesn't call you "my Lord," he chided himself, she'd rather be a chew toy for Grey Wind!

The feminine voice shushed him, and brushed back his hair. Robb opened his eyes. Everything was blurry, dark. There was only the light from a low burning fire in a fireplace across from the bed he was in, and whatever moonlight spilled in through the drawn curtains.

The woman next to him had long curly hair - is this not Hermione? wondered Robb with a frown. He grit his teeth and tried to shift so he could look at her. As he did, pain burst from his shoulder and he stared down, looking at a bandage that wrapped around his upper arm and chest, holding gauze in place.

"Wh-what happened?" he demanded, although his voice was shaky, soft. Gods! he thought angrily, how hurt am I?

"You took an arrow, milord," the young woman whispered. Robb turned to face her fully, eyes narrowed in the dark. She had a round face, with round brown eyes and a pert nose, but more importantly, Robb didn't recognize her.

"Who are you? Where am I? What are you doing in my room?" he asked, gritting his teeth and sitting up. The girl hovered at his side, helping him with cool hands that had him jerking from her when they touched his bare skin. He glanced around the room and saw Olyvar snoring on a chair near the fireplace, and empty mugs on a nearby table.

"Please, milord," implored the young woman again, reaching into her dress and bringing out a glass vial. "You need these tonics to get better."

"What?" Robb looked at the vial in her hands and then his bedside, which had a tray littered with glass bottles and jars of various liquids.

"Just a sip," the woman offered, holding the vial out to him.

"What?" he repeated. He stared at her, his brain foggy and body shaking with exertion as he tried to hold himself up with his one good arm. No one was in the room but them and a useless Olyvar Frey; had he been taken captive? Had they lost the Crag? Where was his Kingsguard? Daryn? Dacey? His great-uncle, or hell, even Lord Bolton?
The girl pushed the vial at him again. Her cool hand slipped up his chest and curled around the back of his neck, urging his head down. "Just a few sips, please. Please - you'll get better, I promise. Everything will be better once you drink this."

"I - ah -"

Several things happened then that Robb catalogued in short order: there was a loud crack, one that burst through the air so that it blew out the glass window in the room and the vial the woman held in her hands.

As it shattered, she shrieked and fell off the side of the bed, landing hard on her rear on the cold floor, staring up in horror at the foot of the bed. Olyvar also woke up, throwing himself to his feet, but completely discombobulated and unable to help.

The door to his bedroom crashed open, and Daryn and Lucas Blackwood charged in, their swords out and ready to fight the new enemy; but as their roaming eyes found the intruder, they both lowered their swords and shared a grin. Behind them, the Greatfish, Bolton, and Umber filled the door, and their tension-filled faces quickly eased into relief.

And there, at the foot of the bed, stood Hermione, her eyes locked on his. Her jeans were muddy and torn, and her pink knitted sweater had pulled and loose threads hanging from it. But most worrying, however, was the large bloody mark across her chest and up over her neck and one side of her face, a long thin streak that looked like it came from flying blood.

Her eyes were a bright amber, almost yellow in the firelight, and narrowed exclusively on the scene in front of her. Her curly hair was beyond riotous. Robb even fancied that he could see sparks of lightning bouncing from one curl to the next.

Robb was relieved to see her.

He was horrified to see her bloody - what happened at Riverrun?

He was enthralled by her.

"Hermione!"

"Robb," said Hermione lowly, her eyes falling on the girl on the floor at his bedside. "Who's this?"

"I have no idea," he cheerfully said. Perhaps his pain was addling his brain?

"L-Lady J-Jeyne," the girl sputtered, slowly rising to her feet.

Hermione pursed her lips together. "Jeyne," she repeated, as though tasting something gross. "I see. And what are you doing here, at this time of night?"

"G-Giving h-his G-grace h-his m-m-medicine," the girl continued, eyes wide and horrified on Hermione.

Hermione's eyes disdainfully looked over the tray. She took a few steps forward, striding towards them and then picked up the nearest, sniffing it. Her face twisted.

"Lady Hermione," called Bolton, his voice carrying in the quiet room. He eased around Daryn and Dacey. "His Grace took an arrow to his shoulder and its festered."

It had? Robb looked down at his bandaged shoulder again and realized that was why he wasn't feel
too well. *Oh.*

Hermione rolled her eyes at Bolton. "I can see that."

With a sigh, she sat on the edge of Robb's bed and leaned forward.

*What?* Robb's eyes went wide as her eyes got impossibly large, and she was close enough for him to make out the dusting of freckles along the bridge of her nose. His breath hitched and he was suddenly holding it. He felt dizzy and was sure it wasn't from using his precious energy up just so he didn't look like a wet trout when he eventually would fall back onto the bed.

Hermione touched his forehead gently, and felt the heat emanating from it. She clucked her tongue and within seconds, potions were floating out of her beaded bag - ever present at her side - and lining themselves up by floating in front of him.

"This will flush the bad bacteria out of you," she started, pointing at a red bottle, which he obediently downed; it tasted of cinnamon and spices. Immediately he began to sweat profusely, and shivered as the heat travelled through his throat and stomach and then warmed him from the inside out.

She pointed at the next, "Fever Reducer," a cold blue potion that tasted of wet snow and mint, which he eagerly drank. He sighed in relief as it cooled his burning tongue and settled his stomach.

A final one, green, that she called "Wiggenweld Potion," had Robb looking at her strangely. She sighed and said, "It's a general cure-all, although it's strength is for restoring someone who took Draught of Living Death. It's a healing potion though, and I can make some more with my ingredients if I need. It'll heal you up right quick."

Within minutes, Robb was feeling better than he had when he woke, and the effects of his fever and the lingering pain from the festering wound were gone. When Hermione vanished the bandages over his chest and arm, there was nothing but a bit of pink, puckered flesh where the arrow went in, and behind, where it was pushed through.

Hermione cautiously ran her fingers over the scarred skin and Robb held himself so still not to shiver. However, when he looked up over Hermione's shoulder, he saw Daryn's smirk and quickly moved his eyes to where his great-uncle and Lord Bolton and Lord Umber stood by the table near the fire (he did his best to ignore how amused they looked as well).

Finally, Hermione declared him "all good," and stood. Robb scowled, perversely upset at her leaving and desirous of her to stand far, far away from him. He ran his hands through his hair and said, tersely, "What news? And how long have I been - unconscious?" he then frowned at Hermione. "And why do you look like that?"

She crossed her arms and said, flatly, "I beg your pardon?"

Robb backpedaled quickly. "Oh, no! Not like that! I mean -" he gestured at her clothes, "You're all… bloody."

"Well spotted, Robb," replied Hermione coolly. "Anything else escape your notice that you wish to share?"

Robb sputtered for a moment and then deliberately turned to the Lords in front of him at the table and ask, "Where do we stand with the Crag?"

"We hold it," replied Umber, badly suppressing a smirk. "Ah, Lady Hermione? As lovely as you are, perhaps you and Lady Dacey can go in search of some new clothes for you? Perhaps Lady Jeyne
can offer you a dress, or a bath at the very least."

Hermione sniffed, tilting her chin up, but her voice was all sugar when she replied, "What a
wonderful idea, Lord Umber."

And then she strode out of the room, never glancing back at Robb except for when she reached for
the heavy door to the chamber. The look she gave him made him feel about two inches tall, like Arya
when she was scolded by their mother for running around and ruining her dress.

Robb did his best not to hunch his shoulders, but his ears rang with the loud slam of the bedroom
doors long after Hermione had left.

Dacey hadn't particularly warmed up to Hermione in the two and a half weeks' since they last saw
one another, but compared to Dacey and Lady Jeyne, she and Hermione were practically BFFs.

The timid girl led Hermione and Dacey to a spare bedroom, this one without any glass in the
window except two shutters. It was cool and drafty, but Lady Jeyne directed a servant to stoke the
fire in the fireplace and it quickly warmed the room.

"I'll have a tub and water brought up for you, my lady," the girl said, not even looking Hermione in
the eyes before she scurried from the room.

Dacey snorted. "Dozy bint."

Hermione shot her a look. "Now, now, you think that of any female that hangs around. At least be
creative."

Dacey rolled her dark eyes and sauntered to a chair in the corner of the small room, flopping down in
it. "How goes things back at Riverrun?"

"If you mean with my research, slow," replied Hermione, pulling off her grimy sweater. Once her
arms were out, she held it aloft in front of her and grimaced at the large puddle of hard, dried blood
that came from when Torrhen had stabbed the one soldier. "I got a bit busy with a few things."

"Well, were you able to discover anything else?" prompted Dacey, reaching a hand out to the table
to draw shapes on it lazily.

Hermione chucked the sweater onto the bed and then toed off her runners, standing only in her
socks. She turned to face Dacey and shrugged. "Maybe. I definitely need to know more about magic
here - and not just in Westeros, but everywhere else. Only recently did I hear Lord Blackwood,
Bracken and Torrhen mention woods witches - but I haven't had a chance to look into that."

"They're just women who live in the wilds and sell potions to unsuspecting fools," scoffed Dacey.
"Love potions, medicine, herbs - whatever they can."

"Does any of it work?" asked Hermione, just as there was a knock on the door and two maids
entered carrying a large bucket of water between them, with two men behind carrying the tub, and
once more bringing a tray of drinks and bread and smoked meat. Lady Jeyne slipped in behind,
bundles in her arms.

"I think you are taller than me, Lady Hermione," she said quietly, peeking up at the witch only to
look quickly back down. "But I brought some of my dresses, and a few of my mother's for you to try
on."
"Oh, no, I really couldn't," protested Hermione, watching as hot water was beginning to fill the tub in front of the fireplace.

Dacey snickered. "Lady Hermione prefers trousers, Lady Jeyne. She barely wore the dress I got her in last time."

Thinking back to the victory dinner of the Whispering Woods, Hermione blushed and shot Dacey a look - it wasn't like Jeyne would understand the context behind the reason why Dacey was laughing.

"Oh," the other girl said, gently placing the dresses on the bed some distance away from the sweater. "Well, I'll leave them behind for you anyway. Shall I have the maids wash your-" she trailed off and looked at the bloody sweater on the bed, and then at Hermione and her grass-stained and muddy jeans, "clothes for you, instead, Lady Hermione?"

"No, it's fine, Jeyne, thanks," said Hermione, dismissing her by turning her back on the girl and moving towards the water. She didn't see the face the girl made, but Dacey did. The older Mormont woman smirked nastily at Jeyne and then shot Hermione a look that was made up of raised eyebrows and wide eyes.

Having only Ginny and Luna as girl friends growing up, Hermione was completely unprepared for the cattiness of Dacey which was more akin to Lavender and Parvati; instead, she shot the other woman a glare back and heard the door behind her close.

"Are you going to turn your back?" sniped Hermione, moving her hands to her jeans' button fly.

"We're all women here, aren't we?" replied Dacey, leaning back and reaching for a mug of ale, as well as the bread to rip off.

Hermione sighed, and steeled herself for the inevitable: Dacey would see her scars. While she was proud of them, like she told the men the other night - *Merlin, was it only less than twenty four hours ago?* - she didn't exactly like having her entire body on display. Still, she yanked her jeans off, and then her camisole and bra and panties last, presenting her back to Dacey the entire time before slipping into the steaming water.

"There's soap, too," called Dacey, and Hermione glanced over the rim of the tub to see her gesturing with a chunk of bread at a stool by the tub's side. Hermione leaned over and grabbed it, sniffing and identifying the cloying sweet scene as roses.

She began to vigorously scrub. "How did everything go here?"

"Not a problem," replied Dacey, swallowing thickly. "Except for when King Robb took the arrow." She paused. "Well… no…"

Hermione turned. "No what?"

Dacey looked down. "I shouldn't say. It's the King's business."

"Am I going to hear about it?" questioned Hermione.

Dacey looked indecisive for a moment, and then nodded. "He'll want to talk to you, I think."

Hermione glanced back. Dacey's voice had been different; and the older Mormont woman was looking at Hermione with a bit more focus than she had before. "What?"

"You've got some interesting scars, witch," the woman said instead.
Hermione turned away from Dacey, her right hand clenched around the slippery soap. She raised her left arm and began scrubbing it with the soap, over the scarred *Mudblood*. "It's a slur," Hermione found herself explaining. "It means dirty blood."

Dacey hummed from her spot by the table. "Did you kill them?"

"I didn't," replied Hermione evenly, "But they're dead now." And then, perversely, Hermione twisted so the side of her neck was bared to the dark-haired woman. She traced a silver line from below her ear for an inch. "She tried to slit my throat too. Maybe that's why I knew how to heal Eddard Karstark so quickly - because I wanted to learn so it wouldn't happen to anyone."

Dacey stared at Hermione for a moment, and then was standing up, hiking her tunic up and baring at stomach. There was a thick, jagged pink scar. "Lance. Against a squid raiding the coast and trying to snatch salt wives."

*Oh, game on.* Hermione knelt, ignoring her bared front, and pointed at the long scar that wove from over her left breast down her sternum and ended just to the right of her belly button. "Entail-erupting curse. I was fifteen!"

Dacey let her shirt drop and then shoved a sleeve up. "Arrow! Two of them! I was thirteen!"

Hermione pointed to her hip. "Falling mortar when Hogwarts was invaded by Death Eaters!" and then another, "Stray cutting curse! Sixteen!"

Dacey swept her hair back and pointed at a line at the base of her neck. "Sword! Siege of the Pyke! Greyjoy Rebellion! I should be headless! Fourteen!"

For a moment, they both stopped and stared at one another, and then, like a switch flipped, they burst into laughter. Hermione sank back down into the cooling water and Dacey fell back into her seat.

"Well, aren't we a pair?" she chuckled.

Hermione ruefully shook her head in agreement, and then wandlessly summoned her clothes to the side of the tub. A quick *scourgify* and her clothes were clean, scrubbed and dried. Hermione leapt from the tub and cast a drying charm on her and then a warming charm, quickly slipping into her underwear and jeans. She decided against the same camisole and sweater, stuffing them in her beaded bag and instead withdrawing a thick, white long-sleeved sweater she favoured and brown ankle boots.

Dacey was shaking her head when Hermione turned around. "I need a bag like that."

"I can charm you one," offered Hermione.

Surprise flashed across Dacey's face, but then she settled on a smile. "I'd like that." She then stood. "Shall we go back at see his Grace?"

"Yes, let's."

The walk back to the chamber Robb had been given was short. Outside the room, Daryn - whom she knew a little - and a tall gangly black-haired man that looked familiar, stood guard. Daryn nodded at Dacey and Hermione, while the other man looked at her curiously.

Daryn opened the door with a loud knock and announcement, "Your Grace? Lady Hermione is here."
"Send her in," called Robb, and Hermione smiled at the Hornwood heir. Dacey remained outside with them.

While Robb was still weak, he had managed to rise from the bed and seat himself at the table with the other man, looking over the communication parchment and maps of the area. Little wooden wolves' heads indicated which keeps and castles the Northern army had taken in the Riverlands. The amount was impressive.

Hermione peered at the map by leaning over Robb's shoulders. She pointed at Stone Hedge. "Lord Bracken's home was overrun with Lannisters. We liberated it the other day. It would be safe to assume though that there are smaller bands of Lannister soldiers roaming the riverlands for easy targets."

Robb frowned. He fingered one of the communication parchments and then peered up at her, but was clearly addressing the men, "Can you give me privacy please?"

Umber was the first to leave, but Bolton shot Robb an unreadable look, while the Blackfish heaved a heavy sigh and motioned for Robb's squire to leave the room, too, despite the young teen's protests.

Hermione slid into a vacant seat. "What's wrong? Dacey said something happened but didn't want to tell me what." She made a face. "Beyond your shoulder wound, of course."

Robb turned away, his face a mask of anguish.

"Robb?"

Hermione reached forward and placed her hand over one of his in his lap. Under her hand, his clenched his into a fist.

"My brothers-" Robb cleared his throat. "We received word that Winterfell was taken by my childhood friend, Theon Greyjoy. My brothers are dead." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Bran was twelve. And Rickon only six. Six."

He breathed heavily and Hermione leaned forward, closer to him and brought her other hand up to place over the one she already held. "Merlin, Robb, I am so sorry."

Robb swallowed thickly, biting back tears by gritting his teeth and squaring his jaw. He sniffed, and tilted his chin up, cutting his blue eyes towards Hermione. "Lord Umber and Lord Bolton have mentioned that it's possible that Theon was lying. That they may be alive… but… with my sisters in King's Landing and my brothers in Winterfell - or not -"

He turned to face Hermione, his hands unfurling and then clutching at hers. "How can I do this, Hermione? I am so far from home, away from my family. Everything I do, I think I'm doing the right thing, but how is it right when this happens?"

"I don't know," she said quietly, holding his gaze steadily.

"This - battle - it's so easy," admitted Robb, his voice just as low. "I can lead men into battle and pick up a sword and fight my way to victory. But keep my family together?" he laughed bitterly. "Maybe it's a Stark curse. And I'll be known as the King Who Lost the North."

"So, let's do what's right and not what's easy, Robb," replied Hermione.

"And what's that?" he asked, shaking his head. "I don't even know what I'm doing here anymore. I'll never get my father's bones back. Tywin Lannister will never trade my sisters for his son, even his
favourite."

Hermione frowned and squeezed his hands. "So what do you want to do?"

"What I want, and what I need to do, are two very different things," retorted Robb, glancing away from her amber eyes. "But," he began quietly, "But if I had to choose, I'd go back home. Back to Winterfell."

"So go home," said Hermione, ducking down a bit to catch his eyes. "Let me help you. If anyone knows about wanting to go home, it's me."

Robb quirked his lips into a small smile, but it was bittersweet. "True enough."

"First," said Hermione, louder, standing up and pushing away from her chair. She kept her fingers entwined with Robb's, and pulled him to his feet, too. "I think I can help - a bit at least - about your siblings. If you want to know if Bran and Rickon are still alive, this will help."

"How?" asked Robb, curious, and allowing himself to be moved around by Hermione as she positioned them to the bottom of the map on the table.

"Do you trust me?" she asked, and he nodded.

"With my life," he replied solemnly.

"Okay," the witch replied, her curly hair bobbing. "Take your dagger - you have one, don't you? Excellent. You're going to make a shallow cut and let three drops fall onto the map. I'll cast a spell that will use the blood that ties you to your siblings and it'll split off for each one, telling us where they currently are."

"Really?" asked Robb, delight in his voice. "Even Jon?"

"Jon?" she repeated, flicking her wrist and settling her wand in her hand.

"My half-brother. My father's son," he explained, and Hermione nodded.

"Of course, you share blood," she answered, and that was enough for Robb: he took his dagger, one he carried in his boots, but had been discarded during his fever, and gently pricked himself on the inside of his palm, letting the blood pool until Hermione was ready.

He curled his hand into a fist and let precisely three drops fall onto the map. Just as the last drop fell, Hermione muttered something low, and swished her wand; a bright white light beamed from it and coalesced into a smokey whispered that covered the map. Once it soaked into the paper, the map flared white for a moment, and then...

The three large drops that grouped together began to slowly edge apart, sliding over the map like water and oil. One large blob went north, and the other south. The one south then broke into two: a smaller blob went and rested over King's Landing on the map, and the other on Harrenhal. The larger northern blob kept going, and Robb watched it nervously, until it split in two: one heading towards the wall and the other, northeast towards the island of Skagos.

He waited for the blob heading for the wall to break off again, and remain either at Castle Black, or move beyond the wall, but it didn't. He waited a bit more and glanced up at Hermione. "Is it done?"

She nodded, biting her lower lip and frowning. There was a crease between her eyebrows. "I thought you said you have five siblings?"
"I do," replied Robb, his own voice highlighting his confusion. "I mean - this is wonderful! Bran and Rickon are alive! Not in Winterfell, but alive! And Arya - it must be her, since I'm still getting ravens from Sansa in King's Landing - is near! But... where's Jon?"

TBC...
After the perplexing issue of Robb's missing half-brother, Jon, Hermione recast the spell after Robb bled some more. When it did the same thing, she recast it again, with Robb offering up even more blood, until he began to look a bit squeamish and then Hermione said it was enough.

The mystery of Jon Snow was to be shelved for another day as Robb called back his Lords and Kingsguard, attempting to look regal in the chair by the fire, his hair a complete unruly mess of auburn, a shadow of stubble beginning to grow into a red beard, and his shirt rumpled. That was the image he presented to his closest advisors and guard: a young man thrust into a position of power he never asked for, but admirably holding up. As his great-Uncle, Lord Umber and Lord Bolton took up positions around the table, and Lucas and Daryn positioned themselves on the inside of the door, Olyvar ran around serving drinks to the men and the lone woman in the room.

Hermione sat next to him, a large and thick book in her lap and her legs crossed on the chair as she read, muttering under her breath. She did not pay attention to the others, completely intent on her book, flipping quickly through the pages as she searched for something and her hair growing bushier as her agitation grew.

Robb looked over at her fondly, and no one failed to notice that had Hermione been anyone else, she would've had to stand to show proper respect to Robb's position - or the fact that she sat at his side was his indication of seeing her as an equal.

"Bran and Rickon are alive," said Robb without preamble.

"I beg your pardon?" sputtered the Blackfish, while Umber goggled at his King. Bolton, however, flicked his eyes speculatively in Hermione's direction.

Robb caught the look the last man made and nodded. "Yes - Hermione cast a spell."

He gestured to the map on the table, and the men leaned over to see the four spots of blood in different locations, including the fact that the two northernmost dots - at the Wall and towards Skagos - were still moving, albeit slowly.

"By the Gods," breathed Umber, eyes wide. He held out a finger to poke at the moving bead of blood, but Hermione's wandtip rapping him smartly on the back of his hand, her eyes never looking up from her book, stopped him.

"No," she said, "Bad Umber. Don't touch the map. You don't want to displace the magic, do you?"

Contrite, the large man cringed and withdrew his hand, trying to surreptitiously rub the back with the other. "Erm, yes - sorry, Lady Hermione. Um - no, I do not."

She sighed and looked up from the book, her eyes slightly shadowed, and looking tired. Robb realized, painfully in that moment, that she had appeared in his room not more than two hours ago, bloodied, and wondered when she last rested.

"These two dots represent Rickon and Bran," explained Robb, "Although I'm not sure which is which. Importantly, though, is that only one dot is in King's Landing."
"Princess Sansa," said Lord Umber, nodding knowledgeably.

"Which means Princess Arya is the one in Harrenhal," said Bolton thoughtfully. His eyes turned inward and Robb could tell he was already thinking of his troops left behind in that area.

"Exactly, Lord Bolton," said Robb. "I'd like you to return to your men and plan for an attack on Harrenhal."

Silence met with Robb's order.

"Harrenhal?" gapped his uncle, finally. "Do you have some dragons, your Grace? Perhaps the Lady Hermione can conjure some up? Harrenhal, for all that it is a ruin now, held for thousands of years without being taken until Aegon burned it."

Robb turned to Hermione, who sighed. "Well, I suppose I could transfigure something to make rocks appear like dragons. Or maybe use Fiendfyre - although that is the Dark Arts and I never used it - but... this is a rescue attempt, isn't it? We don't exactly want to destroy the place and accidentally kill Arya."

The Blackfish blanched at the idea of killing his niece, accidentally or not, and Hermione took that as confirmation that she was right. As usual.

Robb was nodding beside her. "Hermione will join with Bolton and together, they will figure a way into Harrenhal and liberate it, as well as find Arya."

"I will?" repeated Hermione, glancing at Bolton, whose face twitched; something between pleasure at the idea of having a witch on his side, to intense worry - potentially because he would be in charge of her safety.

"Yes," stressed Robb, narrowing his eyes at the curly-haired witch next to him. "And don't think that I know that you're here without Torrhen. We'll return to Riverrun first, regroup with Edmure's men - so, please, Lord Umber, would you mind sending that message on the parchment? - and we'll head out immediately."

There was a pause in the air, unspoken questions hanging with heavy weight. Eventually, Bolton was the one to speak up. "Leaving, your Grace?"

Robb's face twisted into something painful and he glanced away. Hermione wordlessly reached out and grasped the hand he had on his lap, partially hidden from the other's men's eyes as he turned his palm and laced their fingers together, gripping her hand tightly.

"I am the King in the North," said Robb, finally, turning back to his Lords. "I am not in the North. While I wish to protect the riverlands, the truth is that my home - the North, Winterfell - has fallen. My father would not continue pressing south, but would rather protect the North. And so must I."

"... but what about revenge on the south, the Lannisters, the crown, for what they did?" asked Umber, blinking in surprise.

"They'll have it still," said Robb darkly, "Don't think I have forgotten what they took from my family, Lord Umber." He took a deep breath. "But the lone wolf dies. The pack must be kept whole. And I will find my brothers and bring them back to Winterfell. I will have those I trust seek out Arya and Sansa and return them home. I will protect the North, our home. Your home from Ironborn raiders, from the Lannisters, from anything else that comes our way. But I can't do that from here."

Umber's mouth had dropped open, and it was gaping unattractively, while thunderclouds formed in...
his eyes.

Hermione, sensing the tension, cut in. "We can continue guerilla attacks on the Lannisters and others," she offered, bringing the attention to her and away from Robb's change in attack. "I can create Portkeys - objects that will deposit you anywhere and return you with passwords or at predetermined times - and we can send small groups out in flash attacks on keeps or armies. I can create wards to protect castles and property; I can build walls that cut off land or redirect rivers by making new trenches… we have options to continue to annoy the Lannisters or protect the riverlands."

"And what happens when you leave, Lady Hermione?" asked the Blackfish pointedly. "When we don't have your magic to help us?"

Hermione, startled, blinked at Brynden Tully for a long moment, unable to answer him. Robb squeezed Hermione's hand, still in his, and said, firmly, "Then we will continue on as we always do - but we will gratefully take Hermione's help in the meantime. Whatever she kindly offers us, uncle."

There was a rebuke in his tone, and the Blackfish heard it, nodding in apology at Hermione, who, having not realized she was holding her breath, let it out in one long exhale.

"In the meantime," continued Robb, his tone still dangerously even and firm, "We will begin to pack up and set plans to return to Riverrun within the week. From there, we will plan our removal from the riverlands while leaving behind protection from retaliation."

It was clear he was asking his men to think of some ideas.

"Once back at Riverrun, I'd like Hermione and Lord Bolton to meet with me to consider some ideas on taking Harrenhal," he said, looking at both of them. Bolton nodded, a low dip in his chin to indicate the King's orders, and Hermione shrugged. "From there, we will consider plans to return North and retake Winterfell and any other Northern home taken by the Ironborn."

"And then what?" asked Umber grouchyly, crossing his arms. "We came because you called the banners, your Grace. Because you wanted to free your father and then avenge him. What do we do once we're home? When there is no more war to be fought?"

"No more war?" echoed Robb, a dangerous snarl on his lips as they pulled back in a very wolf-like way. Hermione eyed him nervously. "Are we not invaded by the Ironborn? Is Bear Island, Deepwood Motte, the Rills and the Stony Shore free of being raided? Are they able to say that their land, their people do not suffer under the constant fear of Greyjoy ships?"

Umber shifted where he stood.

"Will you explain that to Lord Ryswell, to Lady Dustin?" continued Robb, eyes fixed firmly on the large man. The air was crackling with something similar to magic, but decidedly not, and Hermione's hand twitched in Robb's grip. His eyes - normally a blue that reminded her of the depths of the ocean, were tinged with silver - a silver that was not entirely human.

Outside, Grey Wind howled.

Lord Umber shifted more where he stood, and Hermione saw that one hand - with a few missing fingers - twitched and moved towards the hilt of his sword hanging at his left. "And what of your cause, your Grace?"

Whoa, she thought, wondering what happened to Umber's hand, and then quickly realized the slightly sneering tone the man took. Robb tensed next to her and the tension was racking up to a
point where someone was going to do something stupid.

"Julius Caesar!" she blurted out, shrilly, and immediately everyone turned to her.

"What?" asked Robb, confusion lacing his voice.

Hermione cleared her throat, and in her panic, her voice took on a slightly breathless quality as she began verbal textbook diarrhea. "Julius Caesar was a military leader in my world. He wanted to cross the Rhine river - a huge river that was a natural border between the Germanic tribes and Caesar's Roman legions - and to show them that he could step onto their side of the river at any time he wanted, he had his men build a bridge to cross the Rhine. They built a bridge in ten days, in which Julius Caesar crossed, raided a few villages and burned some others, and then retreated, taking the bridge down after them… just to show that he could."

Everyone in the room was looking at her in varying degrees of confusion, ire, or fond amusement.

Hermione, staring around at them, then continued, quickly, "Well, to be fair, the man was a bit of a tyrant - not to say that Robb is a tyrant, that would be quite mean - but crossing the Rubicon - which is another river, a different river than the Rhine, completely different geographical area - was an important military tactic for Caesar. After all, it was treasonous, and did begin a civil war… but under his command the world was entirely changed because the Roman army practically conquered everywhere they went."

She paused, eyes wide, her words tumbling over one another in her hast to speak. "Not that Robb is a conqueror. He's not trying to conquer anything. Not really. I mean, he didn't exactly stand in front of the westerlands and say, 'Alea iacta est,' which means 'the die is cast.' And honestly, it's common misconception that Caesar even said that in Latin, he spoke Greek!"

"Hermione," said Robb, gently.

"Yes?" she gasped.

"Breathe," he said.

She gulped in air and nodded. "Yes, right. Good idea. Air."

But she had diffused the situation, and Umber no longer looked royally pissed off, nor did Robb's blue eyes hold that sheen of silver she was itching to find a book on to explain it away. Maybe Riverrun had something…?

Bolton cleared his throat and looked out the window. "Shall we shelve some of these ideas until the sun is up? It's only a few hours away, but some sleep is better than none."

"Agreed," said Robb promptly. "We'll meet back here after breaking our fast to discuss the logistics of the move."

Umber grumbled some, but everyone, including Hermione, quickly filed out. She followed Dacey, who she was to share a room with. Looking back, she saw that Robb was staring down at the map, eyes hungrily moving from one blot to another, as though they would disappear if he stopped looking.

---

When Hermione finally woke, it was to the sound of scurrying feet and shouted orders; Robb had clearly wasted no time in organizing his return from the Crag and the westerlands back to Riverrun. The sun was shining through the open window in Dacey's room, and her side of the bed the two had
shared - something Hermione was used to during her time at the Burrow with Ginny - was cold and the sheets thrown back.

Hermione slipped from the bed and reached for her discarded jeans on the floor, thrusting one leg into the denim and then the other, hopping in place as she yanked the skinny jeans up her thighs. Dacey entered just as Hermione was wiggling her hips; the older, black-haired woman stopped in the doorway and burst into laughter.

"Your world's fashion is quite bizarre," she commented, shaking her head. "Come, are you ready? His Grace has called a meeting ahead of our leaving."

"Your fashion is weird," muttered Hermione, buttoning up her fly and then yanking down her sweater. She tried combing her hands through her hair, but they got stuck on the first pass, strands knotted tightly around her fingers and she spent the walk from the bedchamber to Robb's trying to pull the strands apart while Dacey unsuccessfully hid her snickers at her side.

The door was swung open this time, with the tall black-haired young man that looked familiar to Hermione standing guard outside. Dacey was joining him, leaning up against the wall on the other side with a lazy slouch. "Lady Hermione, have you met Lord Lucas Blackwood?"

"Blackwood?" repeated Hermione, perking up and finally yanking at one determined coil of brown wrapped around a finger. She pulled a few times and then gave, looking bizarre with a single finger held aloft by her hair next to her head. "Any relation to Lord Blackwood? Of Raventree Hall?"

Lucas was staring at Hermione's hair, particularly the finger still stuck, but quickly darted his eyes to face forward and over her hair. He stammered, "Ah, aye, milday…" but his eyes crept down as a flush crept across his cheeks.

Hermione sighed, and used her other hand to detangle the single strand. "It's a mess, I know."

Inside, Robb stood with Lords Bolton, Umber, his uncle the Blackfish, and several other men. The other men Hermione didn't know had haggard appearances, dark bruises under their eyes and their wrinkles deepened, punctuated only by yawns that broke in the middle of their conversations. They had ridden all night to arrive at the Crag.

"Ah, Hermione!" greeted Robb enthusiastically, motioning to Olyvar to serve her some food from a sideboard. "Have you met Lord Manderly, Lord Glover, and Lord Forrester? They were leading a joint operation at Pendric Hill and Nunn's Deep, and only arrived here this morning to coordinate our return to Riverrun."

"I haven't had the pleasure," said Hermione, eyeing the three tall and large men. Lord Forrester was a tall man with short swept-back brown hair and a hawkish nose that framed a very square face. A neatly trimmed beard with only a few threads of grey indicated that he wasn't as old as the deep worry lines in his forehead suggested. He nodded at Hermione when he caught her eyes with his hooded ones.

Lord Manderly reminded Hermione of her childhood impressions of Santa Claus: he had long white hair that was pushed back off his large forehead, and a trimmed Van Dyke beard that matched the white of his hair. He had blue eyes that were reminiscent of Dumbledore's, and a rather round, jolly face.

He smiled at Hermione and reached forward to first shake her hand, saying enthusiastically, "Lady Hermione! What an honour it is to meet you! An honour, indeed!" and then attempted to bring her hand to his mouth for a kiss.
Hermione gently extracted it and her lips twitched into a smile. "It's nice to meet you as well, Lord Manderly, properly this time. I believe I've seen your... son around?"

The man beamed, his cheeks ruddy. "Wendyl! Yes!" He looked around the other man in the room, his chest puffed up, as though to say, see? The Winter Witch knows my son!

The last man, Lord Glover, was a man close to Hermione's own father's age: his hair was salt-and-pepper, curly, and although not long like many other men in Westeros, it wasn't shorn either, leaving Hermione to consider it a messy mop. His face was worn, and his brown eyes, although wide, were filled with suspicion as he regarded her.

"Excellent; now that we are all introduced," began Robb, coming around the table and placing a hand on Hermione's lower back to move her where he wanted her to sit, "We can get started."

"Yes," yawned Forrester, "P-Pardon, Your Grace. What's the plan then? Are we moving forward and on to Casterly Rock?"

Robb shook his head. "No. We're returning North."

The three men who knew of this from the previous night made no move or change in facial feature, but the three newcomers were equally shocked.

"Your Grace?" stuttered Manderly.

"Your Grace, we came here because of the wrongs against your father and family," began Glover, eyes steely and clearly working up to say something against his King, "And we have been - right wrongs, that is. Why stop when we've got the Lions running?"

Hermione eyed the large man shrewdly, but then turned to Robb. He needed to answer and convince the man if he wanted to convince the rest of the lords and their men to return North and continue following his lead.

Robb sighed. "How far will we chase them, Lord Glover?"

"Well, to Casterly Rock," the man answered.

"And then once we've taken it?"

Yeah, okay, reign in the arrogance Robb, thought Hermione, narrowing her eyes. He saw her from the corner of his, and waved a negligent hand.

"Well," sputtered Glover, "I suppose we'll head towards King's Landing."

"And say we take King's Landing?" asked Robb. "Would you then name me King of Westeros? In charge of not only the North, the riverlands, but elsewhere?"

Glover's mouth opened and closed.

"My brothers are alive," said Robb, his voice crisp. "I intend to return North and find them. I may be the Young Wolf, or the King in the North, but I can't be a King if I'm the King Who Lost the North. What do you suggest?"

He waited for his men to speak, but none did. To Hermione, the answer was obvious even before she spoke to Robb: going forward held nothing for him, especially with his family so spread out. He wouldn't find what he was looking for.
"I'll end up spreading my men too thin," he said, having thought of it more after everyone had left. "I have no intentions on reaching King's Landing and taking it - the Iron Throne is not for me. I attempted to broker an alliance with either Renly or Stannis, and both turned me away. If they have no need for the North, then the North has no need for them."

"Too right!" agreed Forrester hotly, just as Umber grunted his approval. Although he was clearly unhappy with how the discussion had ended hours earlier, he found other common ground with the young King.

Robb smiled grimly at the men at the table. "I can't avenge my father by continuing on to one castle or the next keep, razing it and… then what? No, Lord Glover - it is best that I put myself where I am needed the most: the North."

With that said, he instructed: "Last night, Lord Umber passed on my messages for my return to Riverrun. Although you rode here ahead of your men, we'll use the parchments to instruct them to retreat back as well. We'll make for Riverrun immediately and be there within a week."

"I could probably get you there faster," mused Hermione out loud, eyes turned up towards the ceiling as she thought. "Although I definitely need to think of a new plan for the horses…"

"What? How?" asked Lord Manderly, blinking in shock.

"Portkeys," said Hermione succinctly. "Apparition would take too much out of me. I mean, I would need to read up on it to make sure I've made them correctly, but Portkeys would work."

"What is a Portkey?" asked Lord Glover suspiciously, eyes narrowed.

Hermione turned to the man; those from the previous night had heard her mention them before, but not necessarily the scope of the magical objects. As such, Hermione gave a dictionary-rote answer, "A Portkey is an object imbued with magic in order to transport anyone touching the object from one location to the next in an almost instantaneous transition."

"As… long… as someone is touching this object?" repeated the Blackfish, curiously, already thinking.

Hermione nodded. "Like… a harness…"

"Or a rope," the man supplied, thinking of how to transport large numbers of people easily.

"Exactly," nodded Hermione with a grin.

"And any number can be transported?" asked Robb gleefully, his blue eyes lighting up.

Hermione frowned, "Well, I guess so. Let me check and get back to you on that."

The rest of the conversation was something Hermione did not need to be a part of; instead, she tuned it out, pulling a large tome from her beaded bag - surprisingly the men around her with the act - and then hastily began flipping through pages in order to find something that would help her with portkey creation. She knew the theory, but practice was another thing.

By the time she had finished reading and rereading the passage from a copied textbook from the Hogwarts Library's restricted section, and had spent some time mimicking the wand movement with her finger as her wand, Hermione realized that Robb had given out orders to everyone and had been patiently waiting for her to finish.
Lord Bolton sat with him, both sipping from cups.

"Erm. Sorry," she said sheepishly, realizing she had gotten caught up in researching rather than socializing.

"No matter, Lady Hermione," grinned Robb, dimples appearing in his cheeks. Hermione felt herself flush - out of embarrassment or something else, she wasn't sure. "Have you read what you needed?"

She nodded. "A few lengths of rope to enchant and it'll work. I'll just need a location to send to people. A timed Portkey with a count-down or one that is password-activated would work."

"Good," said Robb. "How about in the Whispering Woods where we met? Staggering the troops would mean that we are close to Riverrun but not on top of the castle when we arrive."

Hermione shrugged. "Sure."

"Then, we'll leave shortly," said Robb, placing his cup down and standing. Bolton shot to his feet as well. "Once we're in Riverrun, we'll meet and figure out a plan going forward to attack Harrenhal." He paused, and then asked, "The map will be fine if I roll it up, won't it?"

Hermione felt her face soften. "Of course. The blood won't smear. The magic is in the map, now."

Robb sighed in relief, and Bolton reached forward to roll the map up for him, then passed it off to the young King. He nodded at them both, and then strode from the room, presumably to oversee the men at the Crag for their Portkey transport.

It left Bolton and Hermione alone for the first time since they had met.

Both stared awkwardly at one another. For Hermione, she was remembering the man's strange fascination with her; for him, if she knew, he was thinking just what other feats she was capable of, and how that would help him and his standing with his new, young King.

Eventually, Hermione cleared her throat and stood. "Well… I'm… going to go make those Portkeys, Lord Bolton."

"Of course, Lady Hermione," he said, with a short bow. "Might I escort you to the courtyard?"

She grimaced, but nodded.

They left the room together in silence, passing soldiers who scurried from one end to the other ensuring they didn't forget anything. It was loud, and everything steel clanged sharply. By the time they reached the courtyard, Hermione had a headache, one which was going to get worse as she met Lady Spicer.

The woman stood with her daughter, Lady Jeyne, and another man. Although beautiful, in a sense, the brown-haired woman looked sour, her mouth tightly pinched and her eyes hard. Jeyne had inherited her mother's hair colour, as well as the lithe and tiny body, but where Jeyne was round in the face, her mother was long and narrow - sharp, Hermione's mind supplied.

"Ah, Lady Hermione," boomed Umber, drawing everyone's attention towards her. "We're ready when you are!"

Hermione glanced at the courtyard, filled with only Robb's royal guard and Stark men on horseback, and the rest of foot. Those on foot had it easier, holding onto a long coil of rope wound around each wrist; those on horseback were in an awkward line, pressed thigh to thigh.
"In a moment," she called, turning to Robb, who stood with Daryn and Eddard just behind him. He, along with the Blackfish, stood near Lady Spicer and her daughter.

"-thank you for nursing me back to health," he was saying to Lady Jeyne and Lady Spicer, glancing between the two.

Jeyne's eyes darted fearfully at her mother and then Lady Hermione, paling dramatically. Lady Spicer spoke coolly, "Of course, Your Grace. After all, you are an… honoured guest."

"What were you using for his wounds?" spoke up Hermione, planting herself at Robb's side and staring up at the taller woman.

Lady Spicer stared down at her from her nose, eerily reminiscent of Narcissa Malfoy at the Quidditch World Cup. The look on her face was one Hermione had seen before on Purebloods in her world whenever they were in her presence: the stench of dirty blood.

"I'm not sure you would know or understand," the woman began slowly.

"Try me," challenged Hermione, a hard look in her eyes.

At her side, Robb, sensing the tension, turned to look from Hermione slowly to Lady Spicer, his own eyes narrowing.

"An essence of murlap," began Lady Spicer, baldly, "A tea of lavender and rosehip; a creamy poultice made of milk, mint, and aloe."

Hermione hummed thoughtfully. "So… placebos."

"I beg your pardon?" said Lady Spicer, frowning.

"Where I come from, placebos are remedies that people think work, but actually don't because they have no medical properties," explained Hermione. "People think they work because they're told it's actually going to heal them - a mind over matter thing. I noticed that when I arrived and saw the items on the tray that your daughter had prepared next to Robb's table."

The lady of the Crag paled, and beside her, her daughter trembled.

"Lady Spicer," warned Robb lowly, "Is Lady Hermione correct about the medicines prepared?"

The woman pursed her lips tight, but cut her eyes to the man at her side, who quickly jumped into the conversation. "Your Grace! Clearly this is a mistake - the old Maester must have clearly either read the labels wrong in what he gave to Lady Jeyne to treat you with, or, if he had nefarious purposes in mind, it's because he is loyal to the Lannisters and Casterly Rock!"

Way to throw the man to the wolves, thought Hermione, literally.

Robb cut his eyes to the Blackfish and Glover, both who disappeared back into the ruinous keep. Within moments, they returned, the Maester between their arms. The old man was protesting and wriggling in their grasp, but he was old and frail and was quickly thrown to the ground between Robb and his Kingsguard, and Lady Spicer.

"This man says you were hoping I'd die by prescribing me with tonics that would not actually heal me," said Robb, using a cool voice that Hermione had not really heard before. "Is this true?"

The man spat, glaring hatefully up at the young man. By the gate, Grey Wind prowled, exuding
nervous energy. "House Lannister has my loyalty! Not some wolf heathen."

Hermione winced, and Robb's face hardened further.

"Well." He turned his head and spotted a bucket left discarded in the courtyard. With a hand motion, he ordered, "Lord Tully, Lord Forrester, escort the men from the courtyard for Lady Hermione to prepare. Lord Glover, that bucket over there? Upturn it. Lord Bolton, Lord Umber - bring the man."

"Robb - what-?" Hermione took a single step forward, but Robb's cold blue eyes stopped her.

"Hermione," he said, biting her name out. "Go with Lord Forrester." The man came forward and gently wrapped a hand around her upper arm. "Now."

"C'mon, Lady Hermione," murmured the Blackfish on her other side.

Hermione, although dragging her feet, let the burly brown-haired man lead her out of the courtyard. She did, however, strain her neck by looking over her shoulder, tripping often over her feet as she watched Robb walk towards the man, who was being held down by Umber and Bolton, his chin resting on the bucket's bottom.

Forrester pulled her through the gate, passing Grey Wind who sat on his haunches, just as Robb unsheathed his sword from his hip.

Ice settled in her veins as she realized what she had witnessed the lead up to, and through numb lips, she asked, "Did he-? Did Robb just-?"

Forrester glanced down at her, with a tinge of pity in his eyes. "As his father, Eddard Stark used to say: he who passes the sentence, swings the sword."

Hermione reeled back, eyes wide, and her heart pounding furiously in her chest.

"My lady," urged Forrester, "Don't you have something to do?"

"I-"

Hermione glanced at the neat rows of men, only those who were with Robb and his men when they took the Crag; Lord Forrester, Umber, Manderly, and Glover's men would take the traditional route of horseback and foot to Riverrun.

Almost automatically, Hermione visualized the Whispering Woods clearing she had parked her tent over a month ago, and tapped the first length of rope she approached. "Ten seconds," she said, although she heard her voice come from her mouth as something small and far away. She was vaguely aware that Lord Forrester followed behind her discreetly.

By the time she finished half of those with the ropes, Robb, his kingsguard, and Bolton and Umber, as well as Glover, strode through the gate, Grey Wind on Robb's heels. Hermione kept her back to Robb as she finished her task, leaving him and his men as the last to Portkey out.

Robb had one firm grip in Grey Wind's fur, his other on the length of rope the smaller group shared, when he asked, "Are you not joining us, Lady Hermione?"

He glanced pointedly at her, standing apart from them and not holding the rope in her hand. He held up his part of the rope invitingly.

Hermione shook her head. With a hard voice, she said, "No thanks. I'll Apparate to Riverrun. I'm
sure Torrhen and Edmure are already back. I'll catch up with you in a day or so."

She ignored Robb's fallen face, and tapped the rope. It glowed golden, and then they were gone, leaving Hermione alone with the ruins of the Crag behind her - and wondering if Robb had executed only the Maester, or Lady Spicer and her daughter, too, for what they tried to do to him.

She spun on her heel and appeared on the balcony at Riverrun, overlooking the courtyard, with a crack signalling her arrival. Below, a few chicken squawked in protest, and several soldiers on duty on the guardwall across from the balcony cried out in alarm, spinning; but once they saw her, they calmed and returned to their post.

Hermione strode through the second floor and down familiar corridors, intent on reaching the bedroom she was given. A long soak in the bath in her tent was calling her - after all, in twenty-four hours, she had warded two properties, Apparated countless times, engaged in a skirmish at Stone Hedge, and then blind Apparated to Robb, healed him, and now created a dozen or more Portkeys. She was beat!

"Lady Hermione!"

Hermione wanted to groan, but plastered a smile on her face and turned to Edmure, who was loping down the carpeted corridor, his eyes wide. His red hair flopped forward and messily across his forehead and Hermione felt her heart sink.

"What is it?" she asked as he came to a stop in front of her.

He breathed heavily and then gasped, "You must come - to the Kingslayer's - chambers - immediately!"

"What? Why?" demanded Hermione, keeping pace as Edmure turned and ushered her forward. "Has something happened with the wards?"

Edmure cringed. "You could say that."

Curious, and deeply worried, Hermione kept silent until they reached the sparse room that Jaime Lannister was occupying as his prison. There were two Tully guards outside the room, as well as Torrhen who was glaring at everything and nothing.

He sighed upon seeing her, and strode forward until his hands were on her shoulders. His brown eyes looked her over, from the top of her curly head to her boots; Hermione stood still and allowed the look. Satisfied that she didn't have any injuries since out of his sight, he stepped back, revealing an open door, and importantly, an empty room.

Hermione stepped inside, frowning as she looked at the made bed, the latched window, and empty privy.

"Where is he? Where's Jaime?" she asked, turning to face Edmure and Torrhen; while Edmure could enter the room, Torrhen could not, yet neither stepped forward through the keyed-in bloodline she erected with Robb's blood.

"Is your enchantment still working, Lady Hermione?" asked a very tense Edmure.

Hermione nodded slowly.

Then, dread settled over her, and she stilled. Her eyes went wide and said only uttered two very pointed words at Edmure. "What happened?"
The tall redhead gnashed his teeth together, and his eyes flashed angrily. "We arrived at Riverrun last night, only to discover that my sister released the Kingslayer upon learning of my nephew's deaths in Winterfell. With her sharing King Robb's blood, she had access to the man."

"We sent men after him," supplied Torrhen, "But they don't know where he went. And he's not alone - a woman, Brienne of Tarth - is with him. We suspect they're heading south."

Hermione stifled a groan. What could else possibly go wrong?

TBC
Later, Hermione would never be able to explain or tell how she ended up in Robb's war room at Riverrun, standing just in front of Robb's chair but leaving it vacant, in respect for the absent King. One either side of her by the head of the table stood Blackwood and Bracken, and behind her, just to the right as her silent guard and friend, was Torrhen, although the space between Hermione and Bracken was meant for Torrhen if he wished to move forward.

Just further down the table was Edmure, although close enough that Hermione could whisper and he'd hear her; on his side, both Jason Mallister and Karyl Vance, speaking lowly to the young Lord. The stress lines on Edmure's face were deep, but the more Mallister and Vance spoke, the more the lines lessened and Edmure seemed to relax.

Despite that, they were all tense. Ranging up and down the table, were other Tully bannermen: young Lord Lyman Darry at only eight years old, Lord Mooton, Lord Marq Piper who stood near Edmure, one of his best friends, and Lord Ryger; their various sons, knights, and squires. They arranged themselves in small clumps, or remained aloof.

Further down the table, a tall, wiry man with longish, lank black hair with a scowl on his face commanded Hermione and Edmure's attention. The man, Black Walder Frey, had remained behind at Riverrun while his father, Ryman Frey, joined Robb's attack of the Crag. Black Walder was an excellent soldier, and he knew it too; however, Hermione had heard rumours of the man's temper, and she was beginning to witness it firsthand.

Dividing lines had been drawn, and Hermione, Edmure, and Black Walder were all separate entities.

"We cannot let the Kingslayer's escape become common knowledge," Edmure addressed the room at large. "It will demoralize the troops, and set up back in our attempts to free my nieces."

"I agree," said Hermione, her own voice carrying in the room. Unlike the last time when she had been in it, a passive spectator to Robb's elevation of Lord of Winterfell to King in the North and the Trident, Hermione was coolly assessing the situation and drawing together plans and logistics.  
"Catelyn's release of Jaime Lannister was poorly timed, for one, but also incredibly short sighted. Does anyone even know what her reasons were for the release?"

Mallister began to shake his head, his mouth already moving in the shape of a "no," when Black Walder rudely interrupted. "Right, excuse me," he began, sounding anything but, "But why are you here?"

Any soft-spoken conversations that were occurring in the room suddenly fell silent. Behind her, Hermione felt Torrhen stiffen and shift into a more defensible position. Bracken, at her side, scowled
and snarled out, "What are you getting at, Frey?"

Black Walder rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. "I'm just saying - she may be a witch and has helped out with her nifty parchments, but she's not a soldier. She doesn't know battle. What good is she doing by being here as opposed to remaining with the other women? Or, better yet, confined to a room until we have need of her again?"

Hermione blinked in shock.

Blackwood, however, responded quickly and angrily. "How dare you! How dare you impugn Lady Hermione like that! She has engaged in battle and bloodied herself for King Robb and the Riverlands!"

The Frey scoffed. "So she's warming more than just the King's bed, is she? Is that why you and ol' Bracken there are so quick to attach yourself to the bitch? Has she spread her legs and favours for your families? Is that how she saved Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge?"

Hermione stared in shock at the wiry man, barely able to comprehend the vile accusations he was spitting out. It was one thing to be called a Mudblood and looked down at for being smarter than others; it wasn't even the first time she was accused of being a "scarlet woman" as Rita Skeeter and Molly Weasley once called her - but this was the first time it was ever done blatantly to her face.

Torrhen was vibrating with rage behind her, and had swiftly brought out his sword from its sheath, although the tip was still pointed at the ground. His brown eyes were steely and hard, locked on Black Walder. Bracken and Blackwood were both competing with each other, shouting on top of the other's words, trying to be heard.

Others in the room were talking among themselves, or staring at her, or looking back at Black Walder in thought.

This is getting us nowhere, thought Hermione, bringing a hand up to rub at her temples and a burgeoning headache. We need to discuss Jaime Lannister's escape. We need to prepare for Robb's return, which will be within the day. Division within the ranks is bad.

It had been a long two and a half days: Hermione barely had any sleep, or any food, and she was running purely on exhaustion and frustration. In a magical user, that was a bad combination on any day, but in Hermione, who had a temper buried deep and a low tolerance for people on a good day, it was deadly.

Her magic snapped.

Sparks danced between her curls, and her brown eyes glowed amber. The air in the room electrified, charged up and grew thick - not just with the tension in the room, but with magic. Hermione had experienced the physical presence of magic before, a thick, heavy invisible blanket that sucked the air from the room and made the hairs at the back of her neck stand on end and her breath quicken: at the Battle of Hogwarts, and at the Battle at the Department of Mysteries. There was the smell of ozone, of a warm day's humidity about to break before a thunderstorm crashed down upon them all. Magic could be smothering, and for those who had no exposure to it, it silenced the room quickly.

"Black Walder," began Hermione coolly, her eyes flashing dangerously as she caught his dark eyes and held them. "Let me remind you of a few things: I don't need to be here. I don't need to support or help any of you in your war."

At that, both Bracken and Blackwood appeared smug, knowing that their homes were defended.
previously; other Lords had a slightly panicked look on their faces. But Black Walder met Hermione's stare and held it with all the contempt of Severus Snape facing down another melted cauldron by Neville Longbottom.

"But here's the thing," continued Hermione, her voice even, not vibrating with the fury she felt, "I'm choosing to be here."

And I really am, she thought in wonder, Just like years ago I chose to stand by and lie to professors I admired for two eleven year olds who saved my life. It changed everything... and I think this will, too.

"So if you have a problem with that, Frey," finished Hermione, a slight sneer on her mouth, bringing up a hand and pointing, "Then the door is over there."

The man remained silent, his eyes tripping over each and every Lord in the room. While some appeared affronted by Hermione's tone, others met Black Walder's gaze solidly, no more than Bracken and Blackwood, who stood proudly next to the witch.

"I see," he said, quietly, something off in his tone. Sensing the way the wind was shifting, Black Walder nodded his head once at Edmure, and said, "So be it."

He then left the room, several other Freys joining him.

Hermione exhaled silently, and then, turned back to Edmure. "Do we know why your sister let Jaime go?"

Taking the quick change in subject, Edmure sighed. "No. As soon as I discovered the empty room, I had Tully guards place her under arrest."

Hermione stared. "Does she know why?"

There was an uncomfortable silence, broken only by Hermione loud hiss of exasperation. She turned to Blackwood, and said, "Can you go get her and bring her here?"

Instead of looking to his liege lord, Edmure, for permission, he nodded at Hermione and signalled a few of his guards to join him; they quickly left the room. Hermione, her mind already tripping ahead and wondering why Catelyn had done what she had, completely missed the shocked looks that split between looking at Edmure - who seemed vaguely uncomfortable with what happened - and the nonplussed reactions of Torrhen and Bracken near Hermione, by the many others who remained in the room.

Soon, Catelyn was escorted in the room her chin up and face haughty. Her hands were clasped at the front of her blue dress, and she imperiously cast her gaze around the war room, lingering on her brother who stood uncomfortably under her scrutiny. However, despite how regal she tried to appear, her blue eyes were red-rimmed, and her nose twitched as she held back sniffles.

"You wanted to see me?" she asked, her voice filling the silent room of milling Lords, all who stared hard at her.

"Cat," implored Edmure, "Please. Help us understand. Why did you let the Kingslayer go?"

"Why?" the redheaded Stark stared hard at her brother. "Why?" She gave a bitter, hollow laugh. "Because a mother protects her children. I did what I had to do to save my girls."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She'd seen mothers protect their children during her war: Molly Weasley
killed Bellatrix for Ginny's life; Andromeda and Tonks both did what was necessary for their children, even if Tonks sacrificed her life in the process; Lily Potter gave her life for her son. Letting a man go instead of doing something herself was not protecting anyone.

"So what was the plan here?" asked Hermione, crossing her arms and leaning a hip against the table and she drew Catelyn's eyes to hers. "You let Jaime Lannister go, with Brienne of Tarth as... what? A sword and shield? And then what?"

"He'll return to King's Landing," said Catelyn confidently. "With Tywin's favourite son returned, they'll return Sansa to me."

Hermione, who knew that only Sansa was in King's Landing, was curious though about Catelyn's omission of her other daughter. An uneasy feeling crept up Hermione's spine. "And Arya?"

Catelyn shifted. "And Arya, too, of course."

"Because they're both in King's Landing," continued Hermione, eyes narrowed.

"Yes, that's right," said Catelyn, her voice slowly shifting from confident to confused.

"And two girls for the price of one man is fair, you think?"

Catelyn frowned. "They're little girls. Jaime Lannister is a soldier. It's a fair trade."

There were murmurs around the room, angry ones. Hermione cut it off quickly. "And say that Tywin would ever take you up on this offer - ignoring that he hasn't since when Jaime Lannister was our prisoner - how would Arya and Sansa get to Riverrun with only Brienne of Tarth as their escort? Isn't the road dangerous and long?"

Catelyn fidgeted. "I'm - um - I'm sure that my son would send a proper escort to meet them on the King's Road."

"And then straight to the Twins for a wedding, I'd imagine," concluded Hermione. She drummed her fingers on the table.

"At least I'd know my children are safe," declared Catelyn angrily. "The ones I have left!"

The room's angry muttering grew louder, and Hermione heard some threats towards the Greyjoys and the Ironborn host holding Winterfell.

"Right, about that," sighed Hermione, drawing attention once more, "Bran and Rickon-"

"What about my sons?" demanded Catelyn, stepping forward. At her side, Blackwood reached out and clamped a hand on her shoulder, keeping her still. She glared at the man and then turned her eyes back on Hermione, who refused to flinch under the angry blue.

Hermione fought the urge to rub at her forehead. "Do you even read the parchment I spelled for everyone?" When Catelyn refused to answer, remaining to glare, Hermione knew that she only used it to connect with her son and then probably ignored it.

Hermione let a curse from her non-magical childhood slip past her lips in frustration. "Jesus Christ, Lady Stark - when I was with Robb the other night, we found out Bran and Rickon are still alive. You let Jaime Lannister go free for nothing!"

Catelyn's face blanched white and she swayed on her feet. Around them, the room erupted into
chaos, Vance and Mallister both shouting something about reclaiming the Kingslayer at all costs; Bracken was hollering at Marq Piper and young Lyman Darry just stared wide-eyed around him.

Hermione scowled and slipped her wand from its holster and then pointed it in the air. A loud **boom** of displaced air - louder than anything these men had heard before - made them fall silent.

"Gods above," whispered Catelyn, horror in her voice, "What have I done?"

"Lady Stark," said Hermione, but the other woman continued, eyes fixated on some far point.

"Everything that's happened, all this horror that's come to my family…," she trailed off, voice shaky. "It's all because I couldn't love a motherless child."

"What?" Hermione frowned, and turned her head to look at Bracken, who shrugged.

"Cat," protested Edmure, stepping away from Vance and Mallister, to move around the table to go to his sister, "No, that's not true-"

"I couldn't keep my promise, I couldn't keep it," the other woman was muttering.

"Who is she talking about?" asked Bracken in a low voice by Hermione's side.

"Jon Snow, I think," supplied Torrhen, his own voice low, eyes on the woman.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Robb's brother?"

"Half-brother," supplied Torrhen, "He was Lord Stark's bastard."

Hermione scowled at the term, carefully watching the King's mother break down in front of her and the rest of the riverlands Lords. Edmure had eased around the table and was standing in front of his sister, hands on her shoulders.

"I'm a bad mother," she was saying, "I couldn't keep my promise, Edmure. I couldn't! I prayed for Bran to survive. Years before that, one of the boys came down with the pox. Maester Luwin said if he made it through the night, he'd live. But it would be a very long night. So I sat with him all through the darkness, listened to his ragged little breaths, his coughing, his whimpering."

"Cat," warned Edmure, his voice stuck between sorrow and caution, "Don't do this - don't."

"But, I couldn't keep my promise! When my husband brought that baby home from the war, I couldn't bear to look at him, didn't want to see those brown stranger's eyes staring at me. So I prayed to the gods 'Take him away, make him die,'" her voice quivered and her chin trembled, her eyes unfocused. "He got the pox and I knew I was the worst woman who ever lived. A murderer. I'd condemned this poor, innocent child to a horrible death all because I was jealous of his mother, a woman he didn't even know!"

A sob tore from her throat, and she brought her hands to her face to cover, her shoulders trembling. Blackwood stepped away in shock, and Edmure closed his eyes, face upturned. But Catelyn Stark continued, "I prayed to all Seven Gods 'Let the boy live. Let him live and I'll love him. I'll be a mother to him. I'll beg my husband to give him a true name, to call him Stark and be done with it, to make him one of us.'"

Hermione sighed. Catelyn may have been a poor mother to a motherless child, and made some **awful, awful** decisions, but she was clearly beyond any form of rational thinking and had been for some time.
"Edmure?" asked Hermione softly. The redhead turned, his sister in his arms and a question in his eyes. "Take her to her room? With some wine and dinner?"

There was a kind of gratefulness in the man's similar blue eyes, and he left quickly with his sister, leaving Hermione wonder just what was wrong with the Tully family.

"What now?" asked Bracken.

Hermione rolled her shoulders back. "Now, let's brainstorm ideas about Jaime Lannister, so that when Robb gets here, we're not stuck looking like headless chickens."

It took them a better part of a day and a half, stopping only for a few hours, to reach Riverrun from the Whispering Woods. And Robb spent the majority of that time mulishly pondering over Hermione's behaviour.

Was she angry that he executed the Maester of the Westerling's? He had admitted to being a loyal Lannister man, and for not doing his best to help him when injured. Was she angry that he had done the execution over giving the opportunity to one of his men? He didn't like the idea that she was angry at him - but he didn't know why.

"Your Grace."

Robb pulled himself from his thoughts and turned to face Karstark, who rode beside him. The other man's face was turned forward, eyes on Riverrun in the distance. Around the fortress were hundreds of tents of varying size and shape, meant for the numerous soldiers under the Lord's command. Normally a hive of activity, the camp was quiet.

Robb narrowed his eyes, skipping from the gently flapping banners that hung from posts and the battlements of Riverrun, as well as a silent sentries that stood guard around the camp and his grandfather's castle. The castle itself was still under Tully control, but there was something missing from the men.

Robb led the procession and the army that Hermione had Portkeyed out of the Crag down the winding road until they reached the camp. The men they passed bowed to their King, but were otherwise silent. The air was tense, and something unpleasant hung around the men.

"By the Gods," muttered Greatjon from behind, "What happened here?"

The Lords around him ordered their men to areas around the camp, the soldiers grateful for the reprieve from the battles and long march back towards Riverrun, but for Robb and the liege Lords, they went straight to the castle with their squires.

In the courtyard, Edmure, and Maester Vyman, along with the Tully household alone greeted them. Robb was instantly concerned.

"Where's my mother?" he demanded, swinging from his horse. "Where's Hermione?"

Edmure grimaced and shared a glance with Vyman, who looked equally disturbed on his wrinkled face. Robb let his hand fall to his pommel, and behind him, he could hear the creak of leather as his guard prepared for a hostile welcome.

"It's best you come inside, Your Majesty," said Edmure eventually, barely flicking his eyes up to meet Robb's face. "To the war room, I think."
Robb's face hardened and with a sharp nod, he strode past Edmure, with Daryn, Lucas, Eddard, and Dacey following; the rest of the Lords, including Karstark, Umber, Bolton, and his Great-Uncle made their haste on his wake. He could hear his great-uncle hiss at Edmure, "What in the Stranger's name happened?"

Inside the war room, Robb came to a sudden halt. There were large maps pinned up on the wall opposite the windows, with strings leading from one point to another with pins. Around him, squires were rushing back and forth, taking parchment and orders from the room back towards the main camp outside the gates, and the Lords within the room were off in different groups: one far group led by Jason Mallister was pouring over books from the Riverrun library, barking orders and commands about - Robb frowned. Alternative battle strategies?

Near the fireplace, Karyl Vance, Marq Piper, and Lyman Darry were counting numbers and census figures, checking provisions.

And at the head of the table where Robb sat, stood Hermione, holding court of her own, with Blackwood, Bracken, Lord Mooton and Lord Ryger alongside, absently dodging flying books, scrolls, and parchment; Ryger was handing something that looked like a hair comb to Lady Hermione. Torrhen stood at Hermione's side, nodding at something she was saying.

"WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?"

Robb cringed as his voice carried angrily into the room, stopping all movement as everyone turned to him. Immediately, the Lords sitting rose to their feet and then sank to their knees; only Hermione remained standing, completely engrossed in reading off a book she had on the table, her wand tracing something in the air.

"Your Grace," began Lord Jason Mallister, stepping forward. "There is much that has happened since you left for the Crag."

Robb eyed the man. "I can see that." Frustration leaked through his voice. "Now will someone tell me what the hell is going on?"

Edmure nervously slinked up to his nephew's side, though his eyes were on Hermione. "Ah, Lady Hermione? Now that we're all here…?"

Robb frowned. Since when do the men defer to Lady Hermione?

Hermione snapped up from the book, eyes falling on Robb. They crinkled at the corners, slightly, and Robb felt an answering grin on his side; it quickly slid off his face as she realized she was smiling at him. He stifled a sigh, and moved towards his seat at the head of the table, ducking under a flying parchment.

"Lady Hermione?" he said, pointing at it.

Sheepishly, Hermione flicked her wand and the flying texts and scrolls zoomed towards her and then into her beaded bag, disappearing into its depths. "Sorry," she said, and then stepped aside for him to sit in his chair.

It was a cue for the rest of the Lords, and they all soon arranged themselves in their preferred seats; the right to Robb was left empty, and Hermione, after a long moment of looking around and seeing who would sit there, finally sighed when she realized it was for her. Robb hid a smirk behind his hand and then leaned forward slightly, addressing the room at large, "Now. Who is first?"

The Riverlands Lords and Hermione all shared looks, something Robb didn't miss with his keen
eyes, and then Jason Mallister and Karyl Vance were explaining about Tywin's force moving into the riverlands the week previous while Robb had been at the Crag.

While both Vance and Mallister gave glowing reports of their prowess of their men, of Edmure's command, and the routing of the Lannister army, including sending Tywin in retreat, Robb found himself growing more and more annoyed. Did I not tell them to hold Riverrun? There was a reason for that - now Tywin is in retreat and I have no idea where he is!

Then, a worst thought occurred: this was why Hermione was covered in blood! She was in battle! at that, his eyes swung towards Torrhen just to the side of him. Torrhen felt Robb's eyes on him. Upon meeting Robb's eyes, Torrhen flushed and realized that his king knew. The man stiffened and squared his shoulders, standing behind Hermione's seat and looking resolutely forward.

With growing ire, Robb suddenly had visions of problems among the Riverlands lords. While the northern lords had Ironborn raiding their coasts, the Riverland lords would have avenging Lannisters knocking on their keeps once Robb left. If only Edmure hadn't let Tywin escape! He could've engaged him in battle now and taken the man completely out! And then the Kingslayer and the Lord of Casterly Rock would've been his to bargain with for Sansa's release.

Glancing around the room, Robb saw that his great-uncle had a thunderous look upon his face as he too realized what Edmure's blunder cost them; even Bolton and Karstark were looking disapprovingly at his uncle.

"My Lords," interrupted Robb, stopping Vance mid-description of the battle from the northern part of the Red Fork where he had command, "Can I have all but those with me from the Crag, Lord Edmure and Lady Hermione clear the room?"

The men were confused, but Lyman Darry was the first to get up from his seat; quickly, Lord Mooton and Ryger joined, with Vance and Mallister. Marq Piper, one of Edmure's closest friends, trudged slowly out of the room, and Blackwood and Bracken were deeply hesitant, constantly glancing back at Hermione, until she jerked her head to the side and they left.

What was that about? wondered Robb, frowning. Another thing to look into.

Then, he turned to his uncle, who sat alone without the bookends of Mallister and Vance. Robb stared at him for several long minutes, and as each passed, Edmure grew more and more agitated. Finally, he cleared his throat and began, "Ah, if I may, nephew, I encountered a situation with one of my lieutenants at the Stone Mill which may have some bearing-"

His Great-Uncle snorted loudly. "Why don't you shut your mouth about that damned mill? And don't call him 'nephew.' He is your king."

Edmure frowned, and looked from his uncle to his nephew, confusion warring on his face. "Robb knows I meant him no disr-"

Brynden slammed a hand on the table. "You're lucky I'm not your king. I wouldn't let you wave your blunders around like a victory flag!"

"Blunders?" sputtered Edmure. "My blunder sent Tywin's mad dog scurrying back into the westerlands with his tail between his legs. I think King Robb understands we're not gonna win this war if he's the only one winning any battles. No, there's glory enough to go around!"

Hermione winced at Robb's side, making the King glance at her, and then round back to the other redhead in the room. "It's not about glory. Your instructions were to wait for him to come to you."
The Blackfish added, "You were commanded to hold Riverrun, Edmure, no more."

Edmure shot to his feet in protest. "I held Riverrun, and I bloodied Lord Tywin's nose—"

"So you did. But a bloody nose won't win the war, will it?" said Robb knowingly, staring down the other man.

Hermione however, jumped into the conversation. "Hey now! That's not fair. Yes, your instructions said 'Hold Riverrun' but that was it! For how long? Why? What purpose? Was Edmure supposed to let Tywin Lannister siege Riverrun? What did you mean?"

"I-" began Robb, only for Hermione to run over him again, causing him to snap his mouth shut.

"Edmure and I decided together that your decision to 'hold Riverrun' meant that you wanted to lure Lord Lannister in and then hold him from doing a strategic retreat to where his forces were. We planned accordingly without sacrificing Riverrun or any other major holdfasts in the area."

Edmure nodded along. "I seized an opportunity."

Robb turned his head from Hermione to Edmure in disbelief. "What value was the mill?"

"The Mountain was garrisoned across the river from it," answered Edmure promptly, jutting his chin out a bit as he did so.

Robb frowned. "And is he there now?"

"Of course not. We took the fight to him. He could not withstand us," said Edmure, thinking back to his battle with the large man.

"Gods, Edmure!" swore Robb. "I wanted to draw the Mountain into the west, into our country where we could surround him and kill him. I wanted him to chase us, which he would have done because he is a mad dog without a strategic thought in his head. I could have that head on a spike by now!"

"Well, you didn't say that, did you?" snapped Hermione, standing up from her seat next to him. Robb turned to face her, blinking at the sight of her with her hands on her hips and her hair crackling. "What's the point of having a method of contacting each other instantaneously if no one bloody uses it?"

"That's not the point, Hermione," argued Robb hotly, also standing. "The point was that there were orders, and I expect my men to follow them! If they don't follow orders, how can I trust them to have my back in battle? To ensure a battle is successful?"

"We took hostages," said Edmure, glancing nervously between the two as he slowly sat down, "Willem Lannister. Martyn Lannister. Lyle Crakehall."

Robb swung his head to glare at his uncle. "Willem and Martyn Lannister are fourteen years old!"

Karstark cleared his throat. "Martyn is fifteen, I believe."

"Tywin Lannister has Sansa," said Robb loudly, glaring at both Edmure and then Hermione. "Have I sued for peace with his son?"

Edmure and Hermione shared a look, and then Edmure said, slowly, "No…"

"Do you think he'll sue for peace because we have his…" Robb frowned, thinking back to his
lessons with Maester Luwin at Winterfell as they went over family trees. "His father's brother's great-grandsons?"

Edmure began to fidget, eyes darting back to Hermione with more frequency. "No…"

Robb's face hardened, and his anger boiled over. "Gods, what is wrong with you? Why are you looking back at Lady Hermione like a whelp to his wet nurse?"

"Hey!" protested Hermione, but Edmure stuttered, "Well, you see… your mother…"

"My mother what?" demanded Robb. Neither Edmure nor Hermione spoke; both in fact, look away from him. "What? What happened?"

Angrily, Hermione glanced at Robb. "Because someone doesn't use his communication parchment properly, a certain Lady of Riverrun didn't know her sons were still alive, so she let… um, Jaime… go free."

Robb gaped at Hermione. His eyes went to Edmure, who flushed red and avoided him, and then to Torrhen who, miserably, nodded his head. Then -

"WHAT?"

His roar shook the room, and he spotted Karstark cringe from the corner of his eye. The thought of his mother doing something so stupid - so treasonous - was mind boggling, but the way Edmure, Hermione and Torrhen all avoided looking at him spoke the truth.

"I'm guessing that in addition to not telling your mother that Bran and Rickon are alive, you conveniently forgot to mention that Arya isn't even in King's Landing," continued Hermione, scathingly. "Because she seemed to think that Jaime Lannister is worth two daughters."

"Standing beside the witch, Robb's hands clenched into fists. "So you're telling me that not only were we unable to corral the Mountain, which I had planned for; but my mother let the Kingslayer go? And on top of that, my uncle seems to think he's a brilliant military commander, able to make decisions?" Robb turned back to Edmure, demanding snappishly, "How many men did you lose?"

Edmure stuttered, "Two hundred and eight. But for every man we lost, the Lannisters-

"We need our men more than Tywin needs his!" shouted Robb, his patience finally gone.

"I - I'm sorry. I didn't know," muttered Edmure.

"You would have!" snapped Robb. "Right here today at this gathering if you had been patient!"

Bolton cleared his throat and said, quietly, "We seem to be running short of patience here. And there seem to be many more issues to rectify that we did not anticipate originally."

Robb scowled. "You know who isn't losing his patience? Tywin Lannister."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Robb, you don't know that. The man lost over half his force at the Battle of the Fords, as Edmure's been calling it. I myself took out an entire unit of his and the Mountain was sent scurrying, severely wounded. They didn't even head back towards the westerlands, but southeast - either towards Harrenhal or King's Landing. It's not nearly the blunder you're making it out to be."

"And what would you know of military matters?" snapped Robb, turning to face the witch, eyes
Hermione, hearing words that were echoed by Walder Frey so recently, narrowed her own eyes back. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me!" Robb was breathing heavily. "Just what have you contributed to this, Lady Hermione? In your world, are you a mighty warrior? Do witches go forth to battle?"

Instead of saying anything back, Hermione wordlessly snarled at Robb and then spun on her heel, striding towards the door to the war room angrily. Torrhen, caught between remaining by his King, and following the King's order of protecting Hermione, glanced nervously between the two.

Hermione then pushed open the door with her magic, making it slam against the stone. Outside, several of the riverlands Lords he had dismissed were milling around, and they all stared. Then, Hermione, her arm mimicking the motion, used her magic to make the door slam shut again.

Robb, furious that she turned her back on him, grit out to those in the room, "Pardon me, my Lords."

"Oh, thank the Gods," muttered Karstark, "Yes, please, go have a bloody row."

Robb barely heard him, angrily following in Hermione's steps. He yanked the door open and glared around; eventually, Vance felt the need to point in the direction Hermione took off in, silently, and Robb's glower deepened as he realized he had to chase her down in his own castle.

Robb raced up the stairs towards Hermione's bedchamber, two at a time, ignoring the shrieks of a few maids as they went about their daily tasks, and dodging around one steward who flattened himself to the wall as the King raced by. Eventually, Robb made it to Hermione's room, and he banged his closed fist on the door.

"Hermione!" he shouted. "Let me in! We're not done talking!"

Silence answered him.

He growled, and then forced the door open, the momentum making him stumble into the room. His eyes darted around, looking from one corner to the next but Hermione was not in. His eyes stopped on her green tent, and he sucked in a breath.

He warily approached, but then steeled his nerves and pushed the flap away, entering the strange, magical building. At once, strange musical notes assaulted him, creeping from down the hall beyond the living and kitchen area.

Robb followed, and stopped in front of an open doorway. Hermione was curled up on a small cot, knees towards her chest and on her side. In her hand was a strange flat piece of stiff parchment, off-white in colour. Opposite her cot was a desk, one that had several precariously stacked books, and a strange box, a crank on one side, and a golden horn that protruded from the box itself, standing up. The end of the horn opening wide like a flower blossoming. The music was coming from it.

There was a strange grainy quality to the music, with crackles and pops. The top of the box held a black disk that spun, and a golden arm with thin needle roved on top of the disk. A man's voice broke through the strange horn and harp-like music that was much deeper than anything Robb had heard.

"... No one to talk with / All by myself / No one to walk with / I'm happy on the shelf / Ain't misbehavin', / I'm savin' my love for you," the man sung in a gravelly, heavy voice.
Hermione’s sniffle broke between the next words the man sang.

"Hermione?"

Hermione wiped at her eyes with the left sleeve of her shirt pulled down and tightly held in her closed fist. She ignored him, and Robb inched into the tiny bedroom. Once he was close enough, he realized that the parchment she held was not a letter, but a portrait of some sort.

Robb gingerly sat on the edge of the bed. "Hermione? What's this?"

"The Defense Association," said Hermione quietly. "Also known as Dumbledore's Army."

Army, thought Robb, glancing at her thoughtfully. However, he was still angry and refused to speak more.

"See her?" she continued, pointing to a tall, pretty, wavy blonde-haired girl standing near the back right. "That's Lavender Brown. She was seventeen when she died. She was mauled to death by a werewolf."

Robb swallowed thickly, his anger slowing.

"And this?" she pointed to a mousy brown-haired boy near the front. His face was still round with baby fat. "That's Colin Creevey. He snuck back into the castle when the battle began, along with his younger brother Dennis. Colin was fourteen; his brother Dennis lives with the scars of knowing he was thirteen when his brother was murdered just because he was a Muggleborn, like me."

"Hermione - I -"

"I don't stay out late / Don't care to go / Home about eight / Me and my radio / Misbehavin', savin' love for you..."

The music popped and crackled and skipped, and then was silent except a strange whirring noise as something looped over and over.

Hermione rolled onto her back and sat up. She pushed back the left sleeve of her shirt and Robb stared in silent horror at the carved word on her forearm. "Last year. I was tortured and I'll live with this forever. And then not even a week later, we were fighting for our lies at the Battle of Hogwarts, against men double or triple our ages because the adults we looked up to, those who were supposed to protect us, couldn't."

Robb looked up slowly from her arm to her face, and sucked in a breath at the intensity he found in Hermione's eyes. He held them, even as she said lowly, "Don't ever question me about battle, about what I have lost. You don't know."

Robb nervously swallowed, feeling much of his anger leave him a quick rush of emotion. He looked back down at her arm and nodded. By its own violation, his hand shakily stretched forward and then, tentatively, traced the letters of her scar. They were raised, bumpy and red.

M-U-D-B-L-O-O-D, he thought, reading each letter as he moved his finger. She shivered and he withdrew his hand.

"I didn't know," he said quietly.

"I didn't tell you," she replied just as quietly.
Robb sighed and let his hands fall to hang between his knees, hunching his shoulders. "Hermione - you can't - in front of my men, you can't just -"

He glanced at her and saw that she had cringed and was blushing furiously, a splash of pink across her nose and cheeks. "I'm sorry." She shuddered. "There's no excuse - I'm just so used to arguing and talking to Harry and Ron -"

"Harry and Ron?" Robb felt something unpleasant twist in his stomach.

Hermione extended her hand with the portrait, and pointed at the two men on either side of her. "We took this photo near the end of our fifth year. That's Harry," she pointed at the black-haired teen, "and that's Ron," she finished, pointing at the redhead.

"Who are they?" asked Robb, eyes skipping over the others: two twin redheads, their matching solemn faces reminding him of Torrhen and Eddard Karstark; a tall black teen, another tall teen with round cheeks and a serious face, though his eyes were driven with desperation to prove himself, and several girls with different hair colours and strange dresses.

"My best friends," said Hermione, tracing their features. The black-haired teen - Harry - then grinned and waved, and Robb goggled.

"My Lady-! That portrait moved!"

Hermione gave a tiny laugh. "That's magical photos for you."

She quieted and said, "Robb, I am sorry. I'm so used to yelling at Ron to talk sense into him; and Harry is so stubborn - I guess… I just fell back into that pattern with you. I've had more male friends my entire life than female, and I'm used to being the one everyone comes to for help. When you and your men did the same…"

Robb sighed. "You did the same as before."

Hermione nodded miserably. "I didn't mean to question your leadership or your skills, I swear! I guess I… got caught up in the moment."

Robb reached forward and wrapped his hand around Hermione's free one. She glanced at him. "No harm done."

She remained skeptical. "Are you sure? I'm certain everyone heard us yelling."

"And saw me chase after you," agreed Robb with a small grin.

Hermione groaned. "This will just make things worse with Walder Frey."


Hermione shook her head. "Nothing I can't handle. Don't worry about it."

Robb gave her a look, but didn't push. Instead, he sighed, and squeezed her hand. "What am I going to do about my mother?"

"Oh, Robb," said Hermione, her eyes filling with tears. "I don't think your mother is quite… right in the head. She was… so upset at the idea of losing her children that she did something terrible. But I can find Jaime Lannister, I know I can. That's what we were working on when you came in."

"I'll talk to my mother," agreed Robb, "And as for the Kingslayer, well - he'll have some distance to
cover if he's planning on returning to King's Landing. You and Bolton still have Harrenhal to attack."

"You still… want me?" asked Hermione, hesitantly. She bit her lip and glanced away.

Robb leaned forward, catching Hermione's eyes as they sat side-by-side on her bed in a strange, magical tent, and Robb, being far more honest than he even knew, replied, "Hermione. I don't think there will ever be a time when I don't want you."

Hermione beamed at him, and for that moment, everything was fine in Robb's world.

TBC...
Robb spent the next few days either in seclusion or in closed-door meetings with several of his Lords. Often, when that happened, the men would have their squires rushing back and forth, often with messages that were taken to Maester Vyman for his ravens to send elsewhere.

Hermione spent the first day after their -- not-fight, but fight -- in her room, going over what items she had with her and cataloguing them. Initially, she needed some time to herself. There were things she had to refocus on, which the fight emphasized.

Since her arrival, and upon meeting Robb, Hermione had felt like an interloper -- an outlander -- to Westeros. In ways, she still felt the same. She was a modern woman from the twentieth-century and many of the attitudes and social customs of Westeros and the Northern army was foreign and alien to her in ways that she assumed her own cultural habits were to them. She barely understood their social pecking order, and despite being born in a country that had a Queen, the British monarchy was a mere figurehead for the House of Lords and the House of Commons, despite the veto power the Queen had.

Robb’s coronation and absolute power was something hard to swallow at times, especially when she observed the chain of command surrounding him. His father, Eddard Stark, had been well liked and oftentimes spoken about fondly and with respect. Robb didn’t carry the same weight, and despite his successes in battle, he was not his father. Watching the way the men tiptoed around him, constantly testing the new King, made Hermione realize how precarious Robb’s position truly was -- something she noticed in retrospect, after their disagreement. Her questioning him in front of these men could just have easily spelled his death.

He was her friend, though. In the four months she had been in Westeros, Hermione had come to know and like Robb Stark. He was young, untested in some ways and utterly charming and sweet. But then there were times when his eyes went cold and hard, and she was reminded that this was a young man who had heard about his father’s execution and raised armies in his name -- a man who had executed others in the name of the North, as well as killed in battle.

That was a bitter pill to swallow, Hermione knew. To think that her friend would then question her about her abilities -- after all she had done so far for him and his men! -- on the heels of Black Walder Frey’s sneering accusations, had left her chilled. Did he truly think so lowly of her? Was she some token, cute ornament for the Northern army to trot out before the masses? “Oh, look, we have a witch!”?

Those thoughts built the foundation of her insecurity, and coalesced into her emotional outburst: she was a witch out of her environment, stuck in a world she didn’t understand fully nor wanted to. Hearing Robb degrade her talent and ability, -- something she was proud of and had always been proud of as a witch -- hurt.

It hurt a lot.

She raced to her tent and sought out the comfort of knowledge that she had fought in a war and succeeded; that she fought for her right to be considered a citizen, something important to the wizarding world despite the slur on her arm and despite the glaring accusation Purebloods sent her, wondering why someone like her could do so much with magic that they couldn’t. She needed a
reminder of home -- of Harry, Ron, Dumbledore’s Army and the Order of the Phoenix -- people who knew her and what she could do and would say, “you’re scary Hermione -- brilliant, but scary,” with fondness and affection.

Would she ever get home? Hermione had wondered, looking around her tent and the numerous texts she had piled here and there, many filled with useless information. Was she doomed to remained in Westeros for years on end, cataloguing their magic until she had enough information to attempt a portal to her universe? Could she even create a portal? She would need to make a new equation for something no one had ever done before.

Until then -- she had two choices: work with Robb and his army, throwing her lot in with them; or go her own way, alone, and fuck them all.

The choice wasn’t hard -- not after she and Robb spoke.

Since, something had shifted between the two: there was a new kind of understanding, respect that hadn’t quite been there before. And maybe... maybe Robb learned something from the situation, just as she did. After all, she made her choice.

And once she did, Hermione always followed through.

Currently, that afternoon several days after her conversation with Robb, Hermione was wandering from her bedchambers at Riverrun, searching for Bolton.

You’d think the man was easy to find, given how most people hated him and kept an eye out for the man whose family sigil was a flayed man, thought Hermione darkly. Instead, everyone she stopped to ask, which ranged from a maid to Lord Ryger. None were able to tell her anything.

Grumpily huffing, Hermione turned the corner and found herself in a different part of the castle than where she normally would end up: she was on a balcony overlooking another inner courtyard, but this one was large and had several covered alcoves. In the middle, however, was a large practice ring. And in that practice ring, several of Robb’s Kingsguard were carefully sidestepping one another in a steel-and-dagger melee, a free-for-all, where the last man (or, woman in Dacey’s case) standing was the winner.

Hermione rested her elbows on the balustrade above them, leaning forward slightly and eyes fixed on the two she knew the best: Torrhen and Dacey.

Torrhen’s shirt was stuck to him, darkly streaked where sweat had bled through. He and his brother Eddard wove and ducked around and under one another in a beautiful display of two people working in symphony against their enemies. Their footwork and the swings of their blades were reminiscent of the first night that Hermione met them, when they fought Jaime Lannister in the Whispering Woods. The two had been taught together, clearly, and knew that where one brother’s weakness was, the other’s strength would compliment it.

Dacey, being the only female of the group, may have felt like she needed to prove herself, but she had done so time and time again at Robb’s side, and was now using two shorter Gladius-style swords: longer than a dagger and thicker, Dacey’s Roman-inspired gladius blades gave her the protection of length that a dagger didn’t, but the heft and feel of a shorter, stunted sword. She was swinging them with wide arcs, and then quick jabs and chops, with wrist rolls similar to a 1950s greaser with a switchblade.

Lucas Blackwood and Daryn Hornwood had their personal blades, shorter than a Great Sword like the one Robb liked to tell her his father carried, Ice, but still impressive weapons. Dacey was fighting
both men at once, while Torrhen and Eddard attacked all three from the outside, forming intricate layers of Dacey, then Lucas and Daryn, and then Torrhen and Eddard.

The courtyard was filled with the shouts and grunts of the Kingsguard below, and the clang and clear ring of steel hitting steel. Sparks flew as the metal clashed, and Hermione did her best to hide a wince here or there whenever someone got a good slash in. They were not using blunted blades -- this wasn’t just practice for fun, but practice for war.

A crowd had formed, mostly of squires and a few Lords, watching the young men and woman battle -- after all, these were the people who were protecting their King. Eventually, Dacey managed to get the tip of her blade under Daryn’s hilt, hooking it and then spinning it from his grasp; Daryn swore loudly and called, “Out!”

Immediately, the others drew rank around his empty spot as the man walked off from the center of the practice ring to the edge, leaning against the wooden fence that separated the ring from the courtyard walkways and spectators.

Torrhen and Eddard changed their attack, launching themselves at Lucas, who grimaced at the onslaught as Dacey joined them, the three forming a triangle around the black-haired young man. He parried but was on the defensive, his footwork sloppy and eventually, he found himself up against the fence. With four different blades at his neck, he called his own end. “Out!”

There was a moment of pause, as Dacey scurried to the far end of the ring and Torrhen and Eddard took drinks from waiting servants. Hermione grinned at the image: it was just like boxers retreating to their corners while their coaches fanned them or gave them pep talks.

Torrhen guzzled from his goblet, head tipped back and drank so deeply that liquid spilled over the rim of the cup and dribbled down his chin and onto his wet shirt. When he pulled away, he was facing and looking up to Hermione on the balcony. Their eyes met and he grinned, waving.

Hermione gave a tiny huff of a laugh and waved back.

“Lady Hermione!” he called, a large grin on his face and his voice carrying, “Would you not join us? I am eager to see your magical abilities against our swords!”

Immediately, heads swiveled to look up at Hermione.

Her smile slid off her face quickly.

Fuck. You, she thought pointedly at Torrhen, and some of her thought must have translated in the glare she sent, because his smile faltered.

Then, there was a clamouring of others, and Hermione sighed. Not only was it getting harder to hide her abilities -- not like she was trying too hard, mind -- but she didn’t want to go announcing to all of Westeros just what she was capable of, either.

Grudgingly, Hermione turned on her heel and Apparated down into the ring in front of Torrhen; Eddard and Dacey jumped in shock, and there were a few startled cries from spectators, but her bodyguard-cum-friend merely grinned.

“Does this mean you’ll be joining us, Lady Hermione?”

Goddamn him, thought Hermione, looking up at the tall Karstark. His eyes were twinkling enough with amusement that he would make Dumbledore weep with envy. Hermione sighed. “I suppose so.”
She rolled her shoulders and heard a few pops, and then began backing up her steps, until she was far enough from the Karstark brothers and Dacey to keep them all in her line of vision. She flicked her wrist, and her wand slipped from her ever-present wand holster into her waiting palm. A sudden hush overcame those watching.

Hermione slowly turned herself sideways, presenting left shoulder at the front with her wand at hip-height, hidden behind the bulk of her lithe form. Dacey spun both her gladius blades, her entire form square and large, presenting the largest target while Torrhen and Eddard began to weave between each other; one brother was at the front, and then the other stepped in front instead. Their movements were serpentine, their bodies constantly in motion as they sidestepped one another and began to flick their eyes between the two women.

“You won’t take it too hard when I beat you, will you, Lady Hermione?” asked Eddard pleasantly.

“I beg your pardon?” Hermione’s eyebrows shot skyward.

Unlike his brother Torrhen, Eddard had dark brown hair that was shaggy and longish -- Torrhen was the exact opposite with light brown hair that was cut close to his head. Both, however, shared the square face with a high forehead and small, narrow eyes over a heavy brow. Torrhen was far more built like an army man from Hermione’s world, whereas Eddard had the mass of a warrior with large shoulders and a barrel-chest -- making Hermione think that Torrhen took after his mother, given he was the smaller of the two (although not by much) but was the second eldest of the Karstark boys -- their elder brother Harrion, Hermione knew, had been taken prisoner earlier on the war before she arrived and was currently a captive of the Lannister’s.

The rakish grin on Eddard’s face, of course, could only come from being the one without the responsibilities that the heir would have.

“Edd,” cautioned Torrhen, pausing behind his younger brother, “Perhaps it’s best to not--”

“Best not to, what?” Eddard grinned.

Hermione pursed her lips and deliberately turned to Dacey, ignoring the brothers and Torrhen’s put-out expression. “Hey, Dace. What do you say - a girl team up?”

Dacey, despite the strange words, understood the message Hermione was trying to convey. She nodded. “Very well.”

Hermione moved to her friend’s side, and an anticipatory hush fell over the group. Then --

Eddard raced forward, Torrhen just steps behind him. Dacey met them head on, one gladius reaching up to block Eddard’s downward stroke and then the other flashing off to the side as she blocked Torrhen’s side swing. Hermione stepped forward and brandished her wand, turning the hard, packed earth under Eddard’s feet into quicksand.

The young man stumbled, gapping down at his leather boot as the muddy earth suddenly sucked him down, and he wobbled forward.

Dacey laughed, loudly and derisively, and Eddard scrambled to bring his sword up to block her gladius. However, the long sword had barely enough room to clear the churned earth, which Hermione grimly turned back solid.

“Fuck!” shouted Eddard, struggling yank his foot up while performing some impressive backbends to avoid Dacey’s double blades.
Torrhen shook his head, and braced himself in front of his brother, rapidly parrying against Dacey’s rhythmic blows, wheeling forward in on/off timed arcs and sweeping glances. Hermione, for the most part, was able to stand by the side, unchallenged.

Eventually, she stunned Eddard and he keeled over, face-forward onto the ground.

“Edd!” Torrhen groaned, quickly backpedaling and out of Dacey’s reach, and leaving his unconscious brother completely undefended.

The other woman grinned and followed, chasing the older Karstark. Hermione followed in the opposite direction, and soon the two women were circling Torrhen, who kept his sword in front of him with both hands on the hilt, his eyes following them when he could.

Dacey moved, quickly, and Torrhen swung the sword up and over his shoulder to block the swipe she was making towards his back; Hermione took the opportunity to slide in front, where Torrhen’s entire front was open, and point her want at him. “Stup--”

Torrhen’s eyes widened and he hit the floor, sweeping a leg out behind and knocking Dacey, behind him, to the ground with a loud ‘oof’. He rolled away and Hermione scuttled back, out of his leg’s reach. Dacey moaned and rolled from her side to her back and then to her feet, but by then, Torrhen had moved well out of physical reach.

“Do you trust me?” muttered Hermione to Dacey, while the crowd around them catcalled and hollered.

“Suppose so,” the woman muttered back, eyes firmly fixed on Torrhen who was eyeing both women cautiously.

“You take high, and I’ll get him when he’s focused on you,” said Hermione, “But we need to make it showy. Can you jump at him?”

“Jump at him?” Dacey’s incredulous voice was matched by her wide eyes as she stared at Hermione in surprise. Then, she stopped. “Jump at him. Oh. Oh.”

She swung her head back around and Torrhen grit his teeth in response. Dacey nodded and muttered, “When you’re ready, Lady Hermione.”

“Ready,” muttered back Hermione, and then Dacey was racing forward, her gladius at her side and one extended in front. Torrhen braced himself, sword up like a baseball bat, but Dacey changed direction from going directly towards Torrhen in a straight line to the side, only to push off the far fence, launching herself into the air with impressive Parkour skills.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” cried Hermione, directing her wand and Dacey. The spell caught the woman, and she gained a higher lift than physically possible. With Hermione pointing her wand forward, she launched Dacey towards Torrhen quickly like a projectile.

Torrhen swore loudly while the crowd roared their approval, and his sword hit Dacey’s gladius as it swung down. But with his focus on the woman high above him, he left his front and what was closer to the ground open as Hermione pointed her wand at him, ending her spell on Dacey. She watched impassively as a bright blue light hit Torrhen and he crumpled to the ground, stunned.

Dacey landed hard, and then rolled over her shoulder and braced back up on her knees and then stood in a smooth motion, her swords out and extended behind her. She tossed her hair and glanced over her shoulder.
“Did we win?” she called back to Hermione and the rowdy crowd of squires, servants, and Lords, all cheered and whistled.

“I think so!” grinned Hermione, letting her wand slip back into her holster. She dusted her hands off on her thighs and then walked calmly over to Torrhen, closer to her than Eddard. She placed a finger on his forehead, murmured, “Eneverate,” and the man blinked, taking in a raspy, gasping breath.

“What was that?!” he gapped, turning to Hermione who smirked at him. “No, really, Lady Hermione -- what was that? That was amazing!”

Hermione shrugged and moved to Eddard, doing the same to him. He gasped awake. He braced his elbows on his upturned knees and hung his head between.

“How did that happen?” the younger Karstark moaned.

Torrhen, wobbly, moved to his brother and clapped him on the shoulder. “I told you not to underestimate Lady Hermione! And Dacey has become quite skilled with her blades.”

The elder of the two Karstarks turned to Hermione and narrowed his eyes on her. “But don’t think I won’t be asking for a demonstration of that move again, Lady Hermione.”

“Of course,” she demurred, nodding. After all, Robb had placed Torrhen as her guard, and if they were going to fight together, it made sense that they both knew what the other was capable of.

“Lady Hermione,” called a voice, and Hermione turned to see the Greatjon leaning against the fence, a wide grin on his face. “My apologies for interrupting that exciting match, but His Majesty is asking for you and Lord Bolton in the war room.”

She sighed. “Duty calls.”

“Later then, Lady Hermione,” said Torrhen with an easy smile on his sweat-tinged face. “We’re going to practice that together.” He frowned as he looked down at Eddard, still stuck in the muddied earth Hermione made, calling loudly, “Does anyone have a spade?”

Hermione waved and followed the Greatjon, meandering through the crowd a many murmured their praise, in awe of her skills and saying things such as, “That was extraordinary!” and “Amazing!” A few young squires blushed a furious red when she walked by and gave them tiny smiles, making the Greatjon chortle beside her.

Eventually, they entered Riverrun proper, and the Greatjon joined her in the war room. Inside, a merry fire cracked in the large heath. At the head, Robb sat, speaking quietly with Lord Bolton to his left. The Greatjon pulled up a chair and sat himself in his usual spot; around the table were several other Lords and Lady Maege Mormont. The seat next to Robb was vacant, and Hermione took that to mean it was hers.

Once she sat, Robb nodded at her, his blue eyes as bright and clear as a warm summer day. “Now that we’re here, let’s begin: the first thing on the agenda is Harrenhal.”

There was a tense air in the room, and several people shifted in their seats.

“Lady Hermione and Lord Bolton will commence a joint operation together,” continued Robb, his voice stern and making no room for arguments. “They will leave within the next day, heading to where Lord Bolton’s men are currently camped. From there, they will begin their assault on Harrenhal and, as it is primarily a rescue mission, bring my sister Arya back.”
“What’s our time frame on this?” asked Hermione, frowning, drumming her fingers on the table.

“As quickly, but safely, as you can,” replied Robb, his mouth turning down as he turned back to her. “I know that things will likely go wrong, but I’m hoping you can… Apparate or… use one of those - erm, Portkeys? - to travel the distance between Riverrun and the camp to cut down on travel time.”

Hermione nodded absently, wandlessly and wordlessly summoning a map of the Riverlands from a table off to the far side of the room, where numerous other maps were rolled up -- most had been the ones she was using previously to figure out Jaime Lannister’s path.

Once it zoomed towards the table, nearly clipping the Greatjon’s head, she unrolled it and stood, leaning over the table to look at key points. “Lord Bolton, where is the camp now?”

“Ten leagues north of Harrenhal,” replied the soft-spoken man confidently. “Where I have a host of nearly ten thousand.”

“I don’t think we’ll need that many,” replied Hermione.

“Why ever not?” protested Lord Glover, eyes narrowed. “Harrenhal is a fortress; it was only won by the Targaryens because they had dragons. What will you do?”

Hermione glanced up at the man, looking at him from under her brows. It hooded her eyes and her glare looked rather menacing as she said, arrogantly, “I’ll think of something.” She then shot a look at Bolton, who nodded minutely, understanding immediately she didn’t want to say anything.

The look Lord Glover sent her was rather dry and conveyed what he thought of her arrogance. Hermione didn’t bother replying to him or responding to his look.

The meeting went on for another hour or so, until there was a natural break. Eventually, groups splintered off and Lords went their own way. Hermione slowly stood, stretching her back and popping it. At her side, Robb glanced at her, pausing, and she hid a smile by turning her head -- he wanted to speak but wasn’t sure where to begin.

“Shall we walk?” offered Hermione, making sure Robb couldn’t see her smile. “I should head to my room and begin preparations.”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Robb, and he offered her his elbow.

Hermione took it and they wandered the hallways of Riverrun slowly, a gentle pace to their steps.

“If I can ask,” began Hermione tentatively, “What’s happening with your mother?”

Robb heaved a deep sigh. “She has been confined to her room, under guard,” he said quietly. “When she’s not in her room, she remains by my grandfather’s side as his health declines.”

Hermione immediately deduced the problem. “You haven’t decided what to do.”

“No,” agreed Robb. “There is -- too much inconsistency, to be honest. I know I need to harden my heart to what she did but… she’s my mother. Even still, her actions are not of someone’s sound mind or logic. I’ve had the unpleasant duty along with many of the Northern Lords and Lady Mormont who knew my parents better than I to go over my mother’s previous actions.”

He grimaced. “The results are… not good.”

“Oh?”
“She jumps to conclusions far too quickly and then stubbornly keeps to them, beyond all other information that provides alternative perspectives,” clarified Robb. “Even her brokering of my marriage with the Freys was short-sighted and heavily one-sided.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose.

“Enough of this,” said Robb, turning his head down a bit to look at her, “I wanted to ask you something.”

He steered them away from an upcoming staircase through an arch, and then they were in a small courtyard overlooking the Trident, framed by the mountains. There were a few trees in pots and a couple rose bushes growing up vines, and a low, stone seat.

They sat.

“Young Portkeys,” began Robb, “Must you be around to activate them?”

Hermione shook her head. “No. They can be premade with a password or keyword activation sequence.” She paused, narrowing her eyes on him. “Why?”

Robb shifted on the seat. “Well… if I have some of our blacksmiths create house sigil pins… could you turn them into Portkeys? Password activated ones?”

“… in case something goes wrong somewhere?” asked Hermione, her voice low and gentle.

Robb nodded silently.

Hermione tilted her head back and looked up at the sky, there the light blue of the early afternoon was beginning to bleed into a darker hue of purple as twilight began. “I think I can do it, but I wouldn’t want to do too many at once. Magic isn’t the same here as it is back home for me, Robb. And created those wards for Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge really threw me a loop.”

She turned back to him, and saw Robb mouthing, “threw me a loop,” amusement all over his face. He saw her and chuckled. “I apologize; I’m not laughing at you, Lady Hermione.”

“Uh huh.”

He grinned. “I was thinking, there are a few locations that I think would be suitable for the Portkey to take us,” he continued, a smile still on his face. “Perhaps when the Harrenhal siege is done, we can scout a few of these?”

_Alone, Your Majesty?_ thought Hermione, eyebrows raised. “Sure.”

They stood and began to walk again, this time towards Hermione’s room. At the door, Robb lingered, his upper body swaying towards her -- just a bit -- but nothing but his quiet sigh fluttered across her lip.

Instead, he reached forward, took her hand in his and pressed a soft kiss to the back of it. “Until later, Lady Hermione.”

“Until later, Robb,” she replied quietly, watching the tall, redhead King as he disappeared down the hallway, a strange flutter in her stomach.

The next day, Hermione stood with Bolton in a courtyard that she was beginning to become too familiar with. Instead of dressing in just her jeans and her jumper, the air that morning was chilly; she
wore her jeans tucked into half-calf height winter boots, and wore two layers of a cardigan and form-fitting black jacket with a scarf for her top. Her curly brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, but several strands were escaping and curling around her forehead and nape of her neck.

Beside her, Torrhen was checking his sword sheath, as well as other odds and ends he had tucked away in pockets and pouches. Bolton stood immovable on her other side, a veritable rock in the tide that was the early morning bustle of Riverrun.

“Have you everything you need?” called Robb, striding towards her from the interior of Riverrun.

Hermione felt her lips twitch. What a reversal from before! Then, I was the one left behind.

“I think we’re good. It wouldn’t be difficult for me to pop back, anyway.”

He nodded, eyes darting over to Bolton, who nodded deeply to his King, and then to Torrhen, who bowed. “Be safe,” he finally said, his exhaled air puffing in the cold, a small cloud that rose from his lips.

Hermione grinned. “What’s the fun in that?”

Robb’s mouth dropped open, a startled laugh erupting from him, and Hermione reached forward at the same time to touched both Bolton and Torrhen, spinning on her heel and disappearing with a smart crack.

They reappeared in the east, hidden by a tree line that Bolton had known of previously and had passed on to her through Legilimency. Below them, on a desolate, flat piece of earth surrounded by boulders and trampled grass, was the Bolton camp. Several banners of the Flayed Man were spread throughout, the black background and an upside-down flayed man on a cross as eye catching and memorable as the Jolly Roger in Hermione’s own world.

Their arrival was noticed, and a small contingent of men on horseback quickly approached them, weaving back and forth as their horses picked their way up the craggily ground, the hooves carefully finding purchase on loose rubble and stones.

The scenery was beautiful, Hermione noted, with the area closer to the east looking more like northern Scotland: either lush, green rolling hills, or jagged, brownish hills with grey rocks jutting up to impede people. The sky was grey, and there was the hint of a cold rain with dark clouds rolling in from further east.

And, in the near distance, was Harrenhal: a large, black ruin of a once-majestic castle. Several towers remained, but many of them were open to the elements, and even from where she stood, Hermione could see moss growing up and into several open nooks and crannies, as well as the gaping holes in the battlements and walls, where greenery was trying to reclaim the property. Exposed, half-rotted, or fallen wooden beams crisscrossed throughout whatever rooms were left bare, and even with a few Lannister lions flying from serviceable posts, the castle was a sorry sight.

Eventually, the group of horses, led by a tall, hulking mass of a man on a warhorse, stopped in front of them.

“Vargos,” said Bolton quietly, nodding at his man.

“My Lord Bolton,” the man greeted with a deep and accented voice. “We stand ready at your command.”

“Excellent,” replied Bolton, turning to Hermione and Torrhen. “Shall we?”
Hermione found herself behind Torrhen on a spare horse, while Bolton led the procession back towards the camp. There was an uneasy feeling in the air, and Hermione found herself huddling closer to Torrhen, tightening her arms around his stomach as she looked over the soldiers and men that Bolton had under his command.

Many wore the black, red, and white colours of their house, but others wore simple leathers or chainmail. Despite whatever they wore, they all had the same hungry, cruel look to their eyes. Hermione shivered and Torrhen, with his free arm, patted the one she had wrapped around him before sliding to the hilt of his sword, if it was necessary.

*He doesn’t trust these men either,* thought Hermione, feeling the subtle shift of his muscles under her cheek as he sat stiff. *Good.*

Eventually they reached the command tent. Bolton dismounted from his horse easily, and turned to help Hermione, who took his offered hand with some reluctance. The moment her feet were on solid ground, Bolton turned and was ushering her in to the tent, Torrhen quickly on her heels. The moment Bolton’s soldiers pulled back the tent flap, the man began barking out orders -- as much as the quiet man could *bark,* anyway. There was still a steely ring of command in his voice when he spoke.

“What are our numbers?”

“Ten thousand or so, strong, milord,” replied back one of the men in the tent, standing respectively by a table. There were three others with him -- all dressed in boiled leathers and fur.

“What numbers does Harrenhal hold?” Bolton moved to the head of his table, and Hermione slid herself in quietly to a spot between two of the burly looking men, both who scowled down at her. Bolton noticed and snapped, “Lady Hermione is a close friend and confident of our King; furthermore, she has my *full* and *complete* trust. You will treat her with respect.”

The men went contrite, even if they looked at her oddly; but they bowed their heads.

“Harrenhal’s numbers change almost daily,” one of the men spoke up. “They’re constantly coming and going.”

“From where and to where?” asked Hermione, glancing around.

Vorgas, Bolton’s man when he wasn’t on the field, shrugged. “Mainly they scour the countryside for folks hiding out in the villages -- the ones not burnt, anyway. They then bring them back into Harrenhal.”

“It’s a big place,” added the first one who spoke about the numbers, “And I’d imagine they’re using them as slave labour. To keep everything running, that is.”

*And other things* went unsaid. Hermione’s lips thinned.

“But we estimated somewhere in the hundreds,” continued Vorgas, seeing Hermione’s face. “Not more than five or so. It’s an outpost, but they don’t have access to food and steel to keep a full garrison, nor do they have access to run back somewhere else for a garrison to help them retake Harrenhal.”

“Not since the Young Wolf destroyed the old Lion’s armies in the Westerlands, anyway,” chortled gratingly the last man of the group.

“Until we have better numbers, this isn’t helpful,” sighed Hermione. “Robb wants us to destroy
Harrenhal completely -- but only after we rescue Arya. Does anyone know what she looks like?"

There were blank faces around the table. *Fuck*, thought Hermione moodily, her mouth pulling down into a frown.

“If there is to be a rescue mission first,” began Bolton quietly, firmly, “Then we must rescue any prisoners before attempting to destroy the castle.”

“It won’t be an attempt,” replied Hermione, “I already have quite a few ideas on what I can use to blow the place up. Or… well, at least make it useless to hold anyone other than maybe a few people going forward.” She glanced around. “I think our first plan should be getting inside Harrenhal.”

“Agreed,” said Vorgas, crossing his arms. “But they will see us if we try sneaking in. And we cannot scale the walls. It was an impenetrable fortress once.”

“Could you do what we did at Stone Hedge?” asked Torrhen, speaking up for the first time from just off to Hermione’s side.

She turned to look at him and shook her head. “From what I can see, that place is a monster. There are too many nooks and crannies for us to get lost in -- no,” she sighed, realizing what her next step would be and already knowing that Torrhen was going to protest, “We’re going to have to get in the same way everyone else is.”

There was a silence, and then, as she predicted, Torrhen grit out, “What?”

“You’re speaking of being taken prisoner,” said Vorgas, something strange in his voice as he eyed her. Bolton had a thunderous expression on his face.

Hermione nodded. “Yes -- it’ll be the only way. You’ve mentioned they have a high turnover for prisoners… it’s the easiest way to get in. Make them think we’re -- because I know I won’t be going by myself -- are defenceless villagers. I can cast a glamour on us so they overlook our weapons.”

“And my face?” asked Bolton, throwing in his lot of being one of those with her.

“Easily done,” answered Hermione. “I won’t be holding it for long, anyway -- just long enough for us to get in, do a quick headcount and have an idea of how many guards are there at once and where the prisoners are. Once we’re in, it’ll be easy to sow discord with some spells, and we can open the gates for the rest of the soldiers to come in and take over.”

Torrhen muttered something under his breath, and Hermione, despite not hearing what he said, could guess at the feeling. She reached back and swatted him. He swatted gently back at her hand and she resisted the urge to end up returning the favour.

“The whole of the army is unnecessary,” decided Bolton, after thinking for a few minutes. “Vorgas,” he said, turning to the man.

“My lord?” the man straightened.

“Choose several units to be part of the infiltration once Lady Hermione and I open the gates. They must be told and aware that there is not to be a bloodbath of any kind -- all prisoners and servants at Harrenhal are to be left alone. The men will only attack the Lannister guards.”

Vorgas looked slightly put out at the order, but nodded. “At once, my Lord.”

He then left the tent quickly, the slap of his boots hitting the hard, packed earth beneath them. Bolton
turned back to the other three men. “Alvar, Rogar, Harlys -- maintain position around Harrenhal in case there are those who try to escape. Contain them.”

“My lord,” the men said, all murmuring their agreement.

Bolton turned to Hermione and Torrhen. “How many men would you need?”

“The less is better,” said Hermione quietly. “They’re not going to take in more than three villagers running from bandits. More would seem odd.”

Bolton eyed her. “You realize that these men might attempt to rape you? That they could possibly succeed and neither Karstark nor I could intervene.”

Hermione swallowed thickly. “I am aware, but if I need to, I’ll figure some way to stop that from happening first.”

“And if you lose your wand?”

*That* was something Hermione didn’t want to consider just yet, but she knew that she would have to account for that possibility. “I’ll figure something out.”

Torrhen groaned behind her, but realized it was futile to argue. “We’re going to do some combat training when this is all over, Lady Hermione.”

Bolton’s sour face meant that he too, agreed with Torrhen and Hermione sighed noisily. “Well, are we doing this or what?”

When there were no disagreements, Hermione called her wand from its holster and pointed it first at Torrhen. “This is going to feel weird, like something slimy trickling down your back.”

“What--?”

Then he shuddered, and Bolton watched with fascination as Torrhen’s face subtly changed, becoming dirty and smudged with soot and dirt. His boiled leathers, including the buckle straps of the Stark direwolf and sunburst of Karstark were blurred, then disappeared. it looked like he had shrunk several inches, and his clothing was soon mismatched rags, all dirty and greasy.


“Like a beggar,” answered Bolton, absently, as he continued to stare. He turned his pale blue eyes to Hermione. “And this is just an illusion?”

Hermione nodded, eyes still on Torrhen. “Reach for your sword,” she instructed him.

He did so, and Bolton saw a shimmer -- Torrhen was reaching for something that didn’t exist to his eyes, but then, if he squinted, he could see the brown of the scabbard, although his mind was trying to tell him he was imagining things. “How interesting,” he breathed.

“Your turn,” said Hermione, and the spell was repeated with Bolton shivering.

She finished by turning the wand on herself, and the three stood for a moment staring at one another. Finally, Torrhen cleared his throat. “Ready?”

“As ready as we can be,” replied a grim Hermione.
Hermione couldn’t lie. It was something she had accepted years ago, after her disastrous attempted at Borgin and Burkes before their sixth year, wondering what Draco Malfoy had been doing in the store in Knockturn Alley. Her lying skills did not improve with age, but she was damn good at blagging her way through things if she had to, especially when her life was on the line -- Dolores Umbridge had shown her that, and Bellatrix had cemented it during torture.

Playing a hysterical housewife as a bunch of Lannister soldiers in goldcloaks manhandled them towards Harrenhal wasn’t difficult, especially as two took to beating the shit out of Torrhen first, being the youngest in appearance.

“Stop it! Stop it! You’re killing him!” she was shouting shrilly, while Bolton had a tight hold on her arm to keep her from rushing forward.

The Lannister guards laughed and jeered at her, one coming forward and trailing his fingers down her cheek and her neck, ending near her jacket’s collar, even if it looked like a cloak for them.

“What’ll you do for me t’call ’em off?”

Disgusted, Hermione reared back, reminded back to the Snatchers and Scabior, who enjoyed playing with her pink scarf. “I--”

“What’s this?”

Hermione turned to see a large, square man on horseback along with several other Lannister guards ride up to them, just a mere league from the doors to Harrenhal.

“Ser Lorch,” the man who was nearest to Hermione turned to address the knight, “We found these peasants on t’road, begging for scraps. Thought t’bring t’em in.”

The man, with his long, scraggly face scars pulling down lines from his cheeks, frowned as he looked them over. Finally, he turned to those restraining Torrhen, ordering, “Let him go -- he can’t work if he’s too damaged. Bring the rest in. Lord Lannister will decide what to do with them, since he took over the prisoners.”

“Took ‘em over how?” another soldier asked snottily.

Lorch growled. “From the Mountain. Apparently he was wasting manpower.”

Hermione shuddered. She sidled up to Torrhen on one side and Bolton the other. Quietly, they supported him as they were marched over the solid, hard grass and mud that led to the gates of Harrenhal. They opened at their approach, a few guards calling down or from behind to determine their identities.

And then they were in.

Inside, the bleakness of the weather seemed to be a living presence, as everywhere Hermione looked, people were downtrodden or painfully thin. Everyone avoided looking up as they passed two men slopping horse manure, and even the burly young blacksmith pounding away at his sword merely sent them a wary glance before turning his back deliberately.

Ser Lorch led the three new prisoners towards an outdoor pen. The smell of urine and feces wafted over to Hermione and she gagged at the smell. Had they been keeping people there?

“Stay here,” ordered Lorch, leaving them with the same lot that initially found them. The men were clearly put out with babysitting duty, but Hermione didn’t care; already, she was looking around, breathing through her mouth as she took in the tall, looming ruined towers, and slick, dampened grey
stones, and the crumbled wood and stone piles around the base of these towers.

The soldiers who remained inside were less than two hundred - if even that. Many dark corners of the castle were abandoned, left as tricky, hidden traps for unaware people getting lost in the dark and the labyrinth of what remained of Harrenhal. It wouldn’t be hard for them to disappear as well.

After what felt like a significant amount of time for the soldiers around them to lose interest in them, and therefore, not watching them closely, Hermione nudged Torrhen.

He turned to her, hiding his wince. She bought at hand up and murmured a soft *episky* under her breath, healing the bruise on his cheek and straightening his nose.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“There are less than I thought,” breathed Bolton quietly from the other side, speaking for the first time in hours.

Hermione nodded. “It won’t be hard to make them look the other way and we can disappear. Maybe through that passage?” she jerked her head in the direction of the darkened passage she saw earlier. Bolton’s nod was miniscule.

“How long have we been waiting?” muttered Torrhen, wheezing slightly.

“A few hours I think,” answered Hermione. “I can probably make them forget we are here--”

Somewhere, a horse whinnied nervously and immediately the people still hovering around the courtyard froze before scattering. Fear and terror were physically present and Hermione neared fell to her knees as her magic screamed warnings at her.

Hermione turned to see what had caught their fear when she saw the giant scowling man striding towards them. His hair was closely shorn to his scalp, and he had a neatly trimmed beard. But there was something about him -- his large size that would put the Greatjon on par or even smaller than him, as he was closer to Hagrid’s height and size -- that had Hermione’s skin crawl.

At her side, Torrhen hissed and Bolton stood straight.

“Ser Clegane?” one of the Lannister guards asked in confusion.

The man -- known also as the Mountain -- turned and scowled deeply. “You! Gather your men. We ride out immediately.”

*Wait - no -* thought Hermione, thinking back to Barbara Bracken. *This* man hurt her. She couldn’t let him get away!

She made to step forward, but Torrhen stepped on her foot heavily and she yelped.

Clegane turned to her at the noise. His eyes raked her tiny form, and dismissed her easily. “Lorch is dead - wolfsbane. Lord Lannister believes that there is a Brotherhood without Banners man inside the castle. We are to flush him out.”

“Yes, Ser Clegane!” the soldier replied, quickly leaving along with the three others who were guarding them. The Mountain stood for a moment, surveying the scurrying soldiers, and then turned back to them.

“Bitch,” he snapped, pointing at Hermione, making her jump at the tone but bristle at the name. “I
doubt you’ll be useful for anything, but go to the kitchens. Help the wenches there. You two?” He nodded his head at a tall, round man with protruding belly, chin-length dirty blond hair, and nasty gleam in his eyes. “Rorge, have them clearing out the rubble.”

The round man nodded. His eyes lingered more on Hermione’s body as Clegane strode away. In her belly, embers of anger began to stir.

“Kitchen’s that’away,” he sneered, pointing.

Hermione cast a glance back at Torrhen and Bolton; Bolton nodded at her, and she eased around the large man, eyes on him until she passed, dropping them quickly, and scurrying in the direction he pointed.

The kitchen was busy, if not quiet. There was one robust woman, although she was pale with bags under her eyes, leading those with her through several stations of prep. “Oi, who’re you?” she snapped, turning to Hermione as she eased into the warm, low-ceiling room.

“Penelope Clearwater, ma’am,” she stuttered, falling back on the old girlfriend of Percy’s for her cover.

The woman looked her up and down. “You new, girl?”

“Yes,” said Hermione cautiously.

“Fine. Take a spot next to Hot Pie there,” the woman said, pointing to a tubby teen, who was sprinkling flour on a wooden table top with a small smile on his face, “But wash them hands first! And then start kneading the dough!”

Hermione did as she was told, moving to a bucket in the far corner. She did her best to make sure no one was looking, and then charmed the dirt from her hands instead of washing. Afterwards, she moved to Hot Pie’s side.

“What are you making?” she asked quietly, looking at the nervous teen as he glanced up at her and his cheeks turned red.

She smiled and he nervously smiled back.

“Lord Lannister wants fresh bread with his meals,” the teen said, glancing at her from under his curly dark hair, his cheeks still stained a deep red. “An’ my friend Arry said they’re serving up stew tonight.”

Arry? Hermione’s head turned sharply at the name. Was that a diminutive of “Arya”?

“Arry?” asked Hermione carefully, reaching forward to the dough Hot Pie pushed in her direction. She sprinkled flour down on the table as well, thinking back to her mother and Mrs. Weasley doing similar things in their kitchens, and plopped the sticky dough ball on to it. She allowed some of her aggression to bleed through as she pinched and rolled and kneaded the dough.

“Yeah,” Hot Pie said, happily, if not quietly in the kitchen. “She’s always asking for more food. Greedy thing, she is.” He looked up. “She’s serving as Lord Tywin’s cupbearer.”

Hermione frowned. “Is she now…?”

Hot Pie nodded, eyes darting to the entrance way Hermione came from – door less and open to the courtyard. She could no longer see Torrhen and Bolton, but she had a good line of sight towards the
smithy. “She usually visits our other friend in the smithy. Gendry.” He paused, and then said, “See?”

Hermione glanced out and saw a tiny, thin figure sticking to the shadows slip across a stone wall and into the smithy, her features barely lightened by the fire raging inside. But it was enough for Hermione to see she was wearing men’s trousers and a tunic, and had short dark hair.

Hot Pie sighed, a little despondent. “She’ll be a while now.”

“What do you mean?”

He continued, “She likes Gendry better I think. I wasn’t too nice when we first met. But she’ll come and try to weasel food from me later…”

“Oh,” chuckled Hermione, thinking of Ron when she was back at Hogwarts and he wanted to see her homework. “Well, she likes you well enough if she’s asking you for favours.”

Hot Pie nodded, and they shared a grin.

They fell silent and once Hot Pie determined Hermione had done enough to the dough she was working on, traded it for another that needed attention before going to a bowl to rise. They worked in a companionable silence for several hours. Conversation was sparse, but Hermione learned a few things about Hot Pie, whenever it got loud and noisy in the kitchen: he had stolen a loaf of bread (hence his name) in King’s Landing and was chosen by Yoren, a Night’s Watch man, to take the Black. The man, Yoren, had been killed by goldcloaks several months ago, and he, along with his friends Gendry and Weasel, were taken prisoner by them and left in Harrenhal to work for the Lannisters.

Hermione’s arms growing tired quickly with the hard, repetitive movements. She sighed in relief once dinner was served. The serving maids with pale faces taking platters of food up to wherever Tywin Lannister was in the castle, probably planning against Robb at that very moment. Slowly, Hot Pie and Hermione began cleaning up their station.

Dusk had fallen outside, and there were several loud drunken laughs from Lannister guards placed around the courtyard. Hermione heaved silently, her shoulders falling. *What should my next move be? Slip away with a Disillusionment before anyone notices me? Find Torrhen and Bolton?*

The decision was taken from her as the drunken laughs turned into screams, and steel rang against steel.

Hermione raced towards the door, even though Hot Pie grabbed her arm. She twisted to look at him, eyes wide, and lips trembling. “NO! Don’t! It’s not safe!”

Hermione shrugged him off. “Nothing’s safe here,” she snapped back.

“No, you don’t understand!” he protested. “It’s Arry! It’s her plan! You won’t be safe!”

“What?” but Hermione shook her head, and pushed past him. She darted out the empty door frame, eyes adjusting to the dark of night and the flickering of torches lining some of the walls and the firepits scattered around the courtyard.

She stepped into chaos.

TBC...
There were men running around, their swords flashing and glinting in the firelight of the torches and pits around the courtyard. Hermione paused just for a moment on the cusp of the door frame, eyes darting back and forth as she took in as much information as she could in that moment:

Far in front of her, there was a large group of men, their swords, and daggers flashing, near the front entrance. The Lannister guards were trying to contain whatever men were fighting them, and doing well enough given that there were more of them than there were of whomever they were fighting.

She recognized the fighting style of one of the men, and knew that was Torrhen, taking on three of the Lannister guards for every one that someone else was fighting.

Elsewhere, a few of the servants (slaves, her mind whispered), were making their own mark on those who brutalized them, but those shapes were vague and shadowed, with victims half-drawn into the recesses that surrounded the burnt core of the courtyard.

But wherever she looked - there were more Lannisters than there were their men, and Hermione needed to change that balance.

She lurched forward, away from the door of the kitchens, and flung herself behind a tilted wagon of hay for horses. There, kneeling, she peeked around the edge of the wooden cart, eyes moving this way and that as she decided her next move. Then, the cart lurched a bit and she whipped her head around. Hot Pie, from the kitchens, had followed her. His eyes were blown wide and he was trembling, staring up at her.

"We should hide," he muttered, pale faced. "Oh, Gods above, we should hide."

"The kitchens would be a better place for that," pointed out Hermione dryly, turning away and back towards the mess in front of her. She squinted in the dark. These were the times when she missed electricity the most - floodlights would have helped her figure out who was who, after all.

"I'm going to die," the teen was muttering, repeating himself. "Gods, I'm going to die."

Hermione sighed. Useless.

She flicked her wand out into her grasp and smartly tapped her head, letting the glamour bleed off her. Without doing the same to Torrhen and Bolton, their glamours would have to naturally fade - and would do so shortly. In the meantime, she had the basics of plan forming - and she needed those doors open to bring in Vorgas's unit of men that Bolton had stationed ready.

Hot Pie stopped muttering and stared at her, open-mouthed. "What - wait - how?"

"Magic," she muttered absently, and then turned her wand on the hay in the cart.

"Argent Lupifors," she muttered, a bright silver light bursting from her wand. The light settled on the hay, which began to writhe. Both Hermione and Hot Pie, crouched next to the cart, watched silently as the hay began to tremble and separate into clumps, quickly, and then the golden colour lightened to silver and then began to reform into several shapeless blobs.
"Holy Mother, Stranger, and Warrior," breathed Hot Pie as the shapes turned into silver direwolves, their fur strangely stiff and similar in appearance to the hay.

With a snarl, the wolves burst from the cart, smaller than a normal direwolf but large enough to be mistaken as a regular wolf, and stalked forward towards the large group of men fighting.

"Stay here," ordered Hermione.

She raced after the small pack of transfigured hay, her own wand ready. The first Lannister guard they came across froze at the sight of several snarling and saliva-dripping wolves. Hermione smiled grimly and cast *diffindo* at his neck. The wolves trampled over his fallen body, continuing forward.

They fell into the large crowd at the front of the gates with all the force of a rumbling train; even though transfigured, the wolves had weight and presence, and one leapt, flattening a Lannister soldier onto his back and began gnawing at the man's flailing arms as he tried to fend the creature off.

With the wolves as a distraction, Hermione was able to come to Torrhen's side. He had shot up several inches from his glamour, and the spell was slowly bleeding away as his hair colour darkened and the conjured dirt on his skin flaked off, leaving behind streaks of sweat.

"Alright?" he called over the din of screams and shouts, his eyes ahead. They only briefly darted towards Hermione.

She nodded, her own eyes forward. "I need to get to the gate. Do like what we did a Stone Hedge."

"Right," replied Torrhen. Between them and the gate was a mess of people, some dead on the ground from her wolves, and others who were stabbed. The numbers were thinning though, evening out between the influx of Lannister soldiers and those fighting with them.

"Who are all those people?" Hermione asked, incredulously.

Torrhen shrugged. "No idea. I think some are Freys and Boltons, though," he replied. "Anyway - can you do what you did with Dacey? Get me on the other side of this mess?"

"In between the door?" asked Hermione in confirmation. Torrhen made a noise of agreement. "You got it. Take a run and brace yourself."

The taller Karstark began a mad dash forward, and Hermione followed him. He dodged a flying fist and ran at a nervous, young looking teen trying frantically to nock his arrow, bowling over him. Then he pushed forward and up, and Hermione cast *wingardium leviosa* non-verbally, catching her friend. She propelled him over the large mass - even though many were spread out having their own battles - and let go of the spell once he was over their heads and cleared.

He tumbled elegantly to the ground, and brought his sword out to the two guards nervously maintaining the mechanics of the door. Hermione now had to get through the others.

Something was burning, somewhere - someone had knocked over one of the giant fire pits and the rotted wood of a far tower had caught the cinders. The flame was building, higher and higher, and Hermione could suddenly see much more than before in the dark, even if there were lazy spirals of smoke wafting up and the subtle heat was burning at her.

Hermione used the smoke, directing it with her wand, and using *oppungo*, hardened the wispy tendrils into smooth glass daggers. She directed them forward with the force of a dart. The daggers blew through the air, puncturing the two nearest Lannister guards in front of Hermione. Their bodies collapsed and she strode forward.
Someone screamed, racing towards her.

With a frown, Hermione slashed her wand downward sharply, a jagged red spell flying from her and impacting the man, who cried out as he was sent flying backwards from her *reducto*, his chest collapsed inward from the spell's impact.

Someone was watching her.

Hermione's back stiffened, and she stopped. Standing there, in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by only a few of her wolves left animated and corpses, Hermione took the time to look around.

Smoke obscured some parts of Harrenhal, and several people were trying to organize a water brigade line, but most didn't care. A few young men were attempting to wrangle horses, but the creatures were loudly crying in panic and rearing back, their hooves attacking anything in front of them. Elsewhere, the sound of clanging swords continued.

*Who...?* wondered Hermione, eyes narrowed.

Then the smoke parted, and her magic recoiled.

He was tall and lean, with a bright red streak in his long, brown hair. His face was unremarkable - neither attractive nor ugly - but his eyes were firmly fixed on Hermione, just as she was stuck looking at him. His face wasn't his own - Hermione knew that immediately. She could sense the magic on him, cloying and sticky, almost Dark. He was wearing a type of glamour, nothing like her magic, but something different and familiar are the same. It was the first real sense of magic she had in Westeros, and she felt sick at the icky waves of *Dark* that wafted from it.

It reeked of Death.

Despite the chaos around them, the burning tower, the scent of sticky, rich blood flowing from the nearby bodies around them, neither moved. Instead, they were sizing one another up, wondering who would make the first move -

Several horses, free of any riders, thundered past Hermione, shrieking, heading towards the front gates. The horses, panicked and desperate, slammed into the wood and burst through, crying all the while, as men threw themselves out of the way from the stampede.

Hermione blinked and stepped back. The gates were thrown wide open, the there was a roar from beyond from the Bolton men realized they had access. Their steps thundered as several dozen raced forward towards Harrenhal. Realizing she was no longer needed there, Hermione turned her head back to where the man had stood, but he was gone.

Panicked, she spun in a circle, looking for the distinct hair, but there were too many people and none looked like him. She turned on her heel once more, intending to move forward and help Torrhen, when a hulking mass loomed over her.

"You stupid cunt!"

Preservation and years honed from following Harry into danger had Hermione leaping sideways. Where she previously stood, a huge, thick blood-soaked blade slammed into the earth, shaking the ground and sending Hermione tumbling to her rear. She looked up in shock.

The man known as the Mountain - Gregor Clegane - snarled down at her. He yanked his sword from the ground, bringing chunks of dirt up with him. They landed on Hermione and she scrambled back.
Wand, she thought desperately, realizing it dropped out of her hand when she fell. Where's my wand?

He roared something at her again, a single-minded madness lurking in his eyes. His muscles rippled across his chest and arms, and he swung the blade down again towards her. Hermione rolled in the dirt, and then barrelled forward, watching as the man twisted in the last second to keep her in his line of sight.

Her wand was feet away. With growing panic, she summoned it to her even as she crawled forward on her hands and knees, and it slammed hard into her open palm just as she turned to face the man.

She shouted the first spell that came to her. "Lumos solem!"

The man howled and stepped back as the blinding light erupted from the pinpoint of her wand. Even prepared for the sight herself, Hermione felt her eyes water. A nox later, she rose to her feet and then, quickly, began sending spell after spell at him: the fiery orange of confringo, the light green of diffindo. Each spell slammed into the huge man, and each time he took another step back, but never down.

For Barbara, thought Hermione viciously, as the cutting curse landed and slashed a long, thin line across his chest. The man howled. For those you hurt at the Stone Mill, she thought and watched as the blasting curse made him stumble and gasp, clutching at his stomach.

But she was reminded by what Edmure said; this man had taken several arrows and kept going, and even though her magic was strong, she was tired, held her glamour, and her transfigured wolves had her reaching her limit. Desperate, and filled on anger, she reached deep within and nonverbally conjured her trademark bluebell fire. The fire coiled from her wand tip, hanging low and sparking like a whip, and she lashed out with a sharp flick on her wrist.

Clegane's eyes were wide as he stared, dodging under the ice-blue flame as it hit the ground. It left behind a small, circular frost-burned patch.

He turned back to Hermione, who smugly said, "Fire isn't the only thing that burns."

Despite the lacerations she had left on him and the bruises from her spells, the man was incredibly strong and tenacious: he hefted his sword up and caught her bluebell fire flame on the blade. Hermione grit her teeth and wrapped both hands around the shaft of her wand, just as he yanked on his sword, leaving them both caught in a game of tug-of-war, but with far deadlier consequences if she lost.

Then someone shouted and a blade wrenched down through her bluebell fire. Just as Harry once described his ending of Priori Incantatum for her, a long time ago, Hermione found herself flung back as the magic dissipated violently. She gasp, attempting to draw in air from her battered lungs, and then sat up.

Torrhen stood between her and the Mountain, but the man - the coward - had been flung away too. On his feet, he glanced through the haze of smoke and flickering firelight, and then turned, running away and towards the open gates.

"NO!" she screamed, voice hoarse. She scrambled to her feet and made to chase after the man, but Torrhen caught her around the middle and hugged her tight to his chest, even as she clawed at him. "Let go, Torrhen! Let me go!"

"Don't, Lady Hermione!" the man was shouting back at her, struggling to hold onto his sword with
one hand and her wriggling form with his other. "Stop it! Damn it!"

Around them, the outnumbered Lannisters were laying down their swords and surrendering or fighting to their very last as the now overwhelming Bolton forces swept into the courtyard. A no-longer-glamoured Roose Bolton was moving forward and greeting his men, his pale face slightly flushed from his exertion, and his blade red, even though he was absently cleaning it with a torn piece of cloth.

But Hermione only had eyes on the space where she saw the monstrous man, now long gone in the darkness beyond Harrenhal. She screamed her rage out, breathing heavily against the thick arm pinned against her stomach. She was leaning forward, her hands clutching at Torrhen's arm, nails deeply biting into his sleeve.

Torrhen was saying something above her, but she wasn't listening. His arm loosened and he placed her back on the ground, easing away from her slightly as she swayed where she stood.

With her eyes stuck on the gates, she was the only one who saw the figure slinking away behind the Bolton forces, face covered by a drawn-up hood. The figure glanced back, towards the crowd of Bolton men and some Freys, and Hermione froze.

She recognized that nose - that brow - those blue eyes.

Without conscious thought, her wand snapped up and she shouted *diffindo* clear across the courtyard. The spell raced past, a clear line to her target, until it hit. The cutting spell sent the man's head rocking back with the force, but he turned, sensing the danger. Instead it swept up his cheek, across his one eye, throwing his hood back and off his face in the process.

In the confusion of Torrhen shouting, demanding answers, and the awed and shocked cries of those who had never seen her or heard of the Winter Witch before, the man was able to slip through the gates.

But he and Hermione had enough time to hatefully glare at each other long enough to memorize their enemies' features. He looked enough like his son, although more haggard and sharp - like a hungry predator - but Hermione knew that Tywin Lannister managed to escape her that evening, just like the Mountain.

She wouldn't forgive herself for either, in the coming months; thinking *if only* she had been faster, quicker; realized who he was sooner.

For now, though, Hermione sagged against Torrhen, and closed her eyes. Harrenhal was theirs.

Clean up was never fun. She was exhausted and dirty, and her muscles **ached**, and her brain was sluggish, her magic near unresponsive. Torrhen stuck by her side, glancing worriedly at her every so often, but Hermione insisted on meeting any prisoners Vorgas and his men managed to uncover from their hidden nooks and crannies.

Seeing a woman among many of the soldiers seemed to ease some fears, especially with the near reverence and feared awe the men were sending her. Hermione herself was too exhausted to deal with it, and knowing that rumours of her abilities were soon going to grow out of her control, she realized *she didn't care anymore*.

Brightest Witch of her Age - the Winter Witch - what did it matter in the end? They were just titles. She heaved a sigh and wiped a hand across her sweaty forehead. She had been conjuring water for
several men to collect in buckets as they doused things around the burning tower, hoping to stop the flames from jumping elsewhere. Harrenhal was already a wreck - they didn't need to make it more yet until Hermione could gather her strength and destroy the place.

Besides, they hadn't found Arya yet.

"Um… milady? Um… Penelope?"

Hermione started and turned, Torrhen moving with her. There, covered in soot and bashfully shuffling his toe in the dirt was Hot Pie, the teen from the kitchens who followed her into battle and the one she promptly forgot about afterwards. He stood with a tall, young man with huge shoulders and arms and a sour expression on his face, and a small, thin girl with messy short hair, covered in blood and grime. While she wore a scowl that rivalled a fifth-year Harry Potter, there was something in her eyes that belayed her interest in Hermione. She kept looking at her hand - her wand hand.

"Hot Pie!" she yelped, running her eyes over him. "Are you injured?"

He shook his head, and Hermione eased a careful sigh of relief. Although she wouldn't have had anything to do with it, she would've felt guilty for him injuring himself just to follow her because he warned her away from battle.

She then eyed the two others. "Are these your friends you were telling me about? Gendry and Arry?"

Hermione let her eyes linger on Arry - not only for apparently having a plan of her own, but for the potential of her being Robb's younger sister. She glanced at Torrhen, who was eyeing the three as well, but kept a respectful distance away, and his hands off his sword.

Hot Pie nodded enthusiastically. "This is Gendry, and this is Arry. I'm glad you're safe, Penelope! That you weren't caught in Arry's plan!"

He yelped when Arry viciously dug a bony elbow into his chubby side.

"Shut it!" she hissed. The young girl with her mercurial eyes then turned to Hermione. She glanced at Torrhen, who turned his head and pretended to be looking at the burning tower, and then turned her eyes back to Hermione. She looked at her from the top of her curly hair to her dirty boots. The look wasn't quite dismissive, but it was definitely calculating. Grudgingly, she muttered, "You fought well."

Hermione blinked. "Thank you."

Encouraged, Arry seemed to open up a bit more, now eyeing Hermione with speculation. "That was magic, wasn't it?" she demanded.

Hermione nodded.

The girl continued, "I knew it! And you've got a magic wand, too, right? That's what you were fighting with." She paused, and then spoke enthusiastically. "I saw you, you know, at the end? When you were fighting the Mountain, that bastard. You kept hitting him with that orange and then green and orange spell and he kept getting knocked back!"

At her side, the tall, muscled youth named Gendry sighed and rolled his eyes upwards.

"I tired," admitted Hermione, her lips twitching as she looked at the girl. "But he unfortunately got away. I wanted to capture him."
"Bloody prick! Bloody coward!" Arry spat on the ground. "But why did you want him captured? He's better off dead!"

Torrhen stifled a chuckle, and then schooled his features to look like he wasn't listening in when Arry shot him a dirty glance.

"Edmure almost had him captured at the Stone Mill," said Hermione, her tone light even as her eyes narrowed on the young girl as she spoke familiar names. Hermione was one hundred percent sure this little spitfire Gryffindor was Arya Stark. "But he escaped. And Robb wanted him captured, as well, to be made an example of - so I took a chance, too."

The girl sucked in a breath quickly and sharply - the noise was loud in their small circle. Her eyes widened and some of the hard edge melted off her face. "R-Robb?" she stuttered. "Robb Stark?"

Hermione smiled gently at the girl and knelt down, uncaring of getting her jeans dirtier than they were. Behind, she sensed Torrhen moving a bit closer, now focusing on the group. "Yes, Arya - your brother, Robb. We met a few months ago, and I've been helping him since. He sent me to Harrenhal with Lord Bolton to find you, specifically. Torrhen Karstark, Bolton, and I snuck in here to find you tonight."

Arry - Arya's - eyes went even wider. "He knew I was here?"

Hermione nodded. "We did a spell a few weeks ago. Sansa's still in King's Landing, but you were here. And Bran and Rickon are elsewhere in the North."

"They're dead," retorted Arya harshly, colour appearing on her cheeks. She spat the words out, suddenly leaning back from Hermione. "You're lying! You're lying! You're a Lannister supporter!"

"I'm not lying," replied Hermione calmly, catching the young girl's grey eyes. "Did you not see my wolves attack the Lannister soldiers? Please, Arya, please."

Hermione turned her head, but maintained eye contact. "Torrhen, don't you have your communication parchment on you?"

"Yes, I do, Lady Hermione," her friend replied, and there was some rustling as he dug through his many pouches and pockets, until he passed the parchment and a quill over her shoulder and into her line of sight. Hermione took it, glancing at it, and the unrolling it. Robb's untidy scrawl greeted her, with the words, update me when you can - when you find Arya. And then, underneath, like an afterthought, be safe.

Hermione passed the parchment to Arya, who snatched it and skipped backwards from Hermione, closer to Gendry, who glanced at it but made no attempt to read. Hermione was unsure if he ever could read, to be honest.

She watched Arya quickly read the parchment, unrolling it further, and seeing earlier notes in her brother's hand and those of the other Lords as they exchanged notes on how things were going for their military advances, or scouting sessions. Most remained in Riverrun, now, but there were those like Hermione and Bolton out on missions.

Arya's eyes went back down to the line two lines, rereading the words repeatedly. A shaky hand traced the words. Eventually, she looked up, and Hermione didn't see a fierce little Gryffindor - but a broken girl who had been left alone with no one to care for her.

Her eyes watered and then she was in Hermione's arms, clutching tightly to her and shaking. Hermione, despite having no experience in soothing children, even though she had once been a
Prefect, froze for a moment and then cuddled the girl close. Behind her, she felt Torrhen gently take the parchment back from the young Stark's boneless hands.

"It'll be okay, Arya," whispered Hermione into the girl's messy dark hair. "You're safe now. You're safe, I promise."

Being a King was no easy feat. Robb was constantly fielding questions for resources, demands for updates on plans, or sorting through grievances among his Lords. Even recently, he had to figure out a plan going forward on dealing with his own mother and her treasonous actions. His own mother! He rarely had a moment to himself - except now.

It had been several days since Roose Bolton, Torrhen Karstark, and Hermione had left for their Harrenhal mission. The first day or so was spent fretting, as all other battles Hermione had fought in were after-the-fact knowledge for him. This was the first time he was specifically sending her out to fight, and while he knew she was capable - she had told him enough times (and he had subtly questioned those under Edmure's command in the days that followed their fight, learning that two Riverlands Lords, Bracken and Blackwood, were completely enamoured with her and her abilities) - he worried.

So, taking a moment of free time for himself, he ordered his servants to draw a bath, and he retreated to his bedchamber. Daryn and Eddard remained outside his door, loyal kingsguard as they were. Dacey had wandered up at some point - and even from where he was near his fireplace, where a large tub had been dropped in front of for his use - he could hear Dacey loudly goading them in her and Hermione resounding victory during a training melee earlier that week.

Robb smiled. He hadn't been there to see it, but he had heard about it afterward. The entire castle was talking about Hermione's abilities, and it seemed that she was slowly warming even her deniers to her abilities and talents.

Disrobing, Robb left his clothes beside the tub on the floor and eased into the warm water of his bath. The water came up to his collarbone, and he sighed, sinking into the heat and letting it relax his tense muscles. He tipped his head back and let it rest on the lip of the tub, and his eyes slowly closed.

Without realizing or meaning to, his mind drifted.

_He was enjoying the heat of his bath - the tendrils of steam rising from the warm water curling his hair more so than normal, especially those at the nape of his neck into tight swirls of auburn. He let his hands drape over the edge of the tub on either side, water dripping from his wet fingertips as the cool air of the room chilled his arms._

_The chilled air was familiar - a comfort - a reminder of his childhood bedroom in Winterfell. That's where he was - surrounded by the scent of cool winter air coming in from a partially opened window, overlooking the Wolfs Wood beyond the stone wall that surrounded the ancestral Stark seat._

_It was gently snowing outside, the afternoon sun sinking behind grey clouds and glinting off large, soft flakes. It was quiet beyond the window, the air still and calm. Winter was always relaxing for Robb._

"Aren't you cold?" a feminine voice asked. A cool breeze accompanied her as she stole into the room using the main door, which she shut firmly behind her.

Robb kept his eyes closed, but a small smile stretched across his lips. "Maybe I am. Maybe you'll care to warm me up?"
The woman snorted. "Does that line work?"

"I don't know," he replied, his voice teasing and light. "Why don't you tell me?"

There was silence, but he heard the fabric of her clothes whisper and rustle as she moved close to him, walking gently across the stone floor and rugs until she was beside him. He felt the air displace as she knelt, and then her cool fingertips ran down from his left shoulder to his hand, catching and spreading droplets of water over the light hair on his forearm.

He turned his left hand over and hers closed over his. She laced her fingers tightly with his, their arms pressed together. He felt her rest her chin on his shoulder, and he tipped his head towards her until their foreheads touched, even though he kept his eyes closed.

"You keep me grounded," he murmured in the quiet of the bedroom.

"You remind me what we're fighting for," she replied, just as quietly.

He sighed. "I'm glad you're here."

She paused, and then said, even quieter than before, "I'm glad I didn't leave."

He opened his eyes, looking into her amber ones, and closed the minute distance between their lips to taste her -

A loud knock on his bedroom door had Robb startle and slip in the tub, sliding down until the bottom half of his face was submerged. He choked and spluttered, flailing a moment or two before righting himself.

"Your Grace?" a cautious voice called from the door. Daryn, Robb's mind supplied. He sound vaguely worried. "Your Grace, there is news from Harrenhal."

Robb scrambled for the side of the tub, slipping wetly until he managed to pull himself over the edge and wrap himself in a towel left behind by a maid. He didn't bother dressing, just yanked open the door with his wet hair standing on end, one hand clutching the towel closed.

"What?" his eyes were wide and frenzied. "What news? Is it Hermione? Has she found Arya?"

Daryn struggled not to let his amusement show, but his eyes did dip once or twice before he looked back up and over Robb's shoulder. "Ah, yes, Your Grace. Lady Hermione wrote that Lord Bolton and his men managed to take Harrenhal with little casualties. And they found Princess Arya, alive and safe."

Robb wanted to sag in relief, and for a moment, he leaned against the door he held open. Then, he straightened and was back to being a King. "Excellent. When will they be returning to Riverrun?"

"Erm, that's the thing, Your Grace," said Daryn, trying his hardest to press his lips in a thin line. "Lady Hermione Apparated herself and Princess Arya here. They're just down the hall and on their way."

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then -

"What?" Robb glanced down the hall, spotted a smug looking Eddard and sighing Dacey on opposite walls, just as a small figure pushed past them and raced forward. Following behind her as she turned the corner was Hermione, covered in soot, grime, and blood, but she had a smile on her face.
The little figure didn't give him a moment, barrelling into him. Robb let go of the door, his other hand
tightening on his towel in horror. Tiny arms squeezed his sides, and the dirty pixie face sniffled.

"Arya?" asked Robb incredulously, staring down the short and messy hair.

The girl sniffled again and burrowed deeper into his bare chest, squeezing tighter and Robb sucked
in air sharply. He looked up and stuck his gaze on Hermione, who had finally come to a stop a few
feet from him. Daryn slipped away, just down the hall, in a semblance of privacy.

"Hermione, what happened?" he whispered, glancing down at his sister who refused to let go of
him, and then up at the witch.

Hermione crossed her arms and leaned against the wall by the open door, looking down at Arya
fondly. "She was hiding in plain sight, as Tywin Lannister's cupbearer. I managed to befriend -
accidentally - one of her friends that she made after escaping King's Landing. We met after we took
Harrenhal. I figured it was best to bring her straight here instead of cleaning things up at Harrenhal."

"I - of course -" stuttered Robb, nodding.

Hermione smirked. "Did we interrupt something?"

"Interrupt? What?" then Robb looked down, realizing that Arya was clinging to his still wet and half-
naked self, and found himself blushing furiously. His head shot back up and he began to gently, if
not frantically, disentangle Arya from his waist. "Um-

"Looks like we interrupted your brother's bath, Arya," said Hermione with glee in her voice. Robb's
ears burned.

Arya drew back, and although her eyes were red and blotchy, they were clear and light. Gods, she's
no longer the eleven year old girl I said goodbye to those years ago. She's nearly thirteen!

"Sorry," she mumbled, but then she was glancing between the smirking Hermione and blushing
Robb, a devious look growing on her face.

Oh, no. Attempting to nip whatever plan was brewing in her mind, Robb drew himself up and,
resolutely ignoring everyone in the hall, pointedly said, "Arya - you look a right mess. Come on,
little sister - I've just finished with my bath. I think the water is calling your name."

Horror stole over Arya's face. "What?!!"

"Bath time. Now," ordered Robb, opening his bedroom door further and pointing with his free hand
at the still-warm tub in front of his fireplace. "You don't want to greet Mother looking like that, do
you?"

Indecision warred over Arya's face, but she sighed, deeply and loudly, in the perfectly frustrated way
teenagers can do, and she trudged forward into the room. Robb and Hermione watched her for a
moment, and then he turned back to the young woman.

"Are you staying?" he asked, his heart pounding furiously in his chest. He was sure she could hear it,
it was so loud.

Hermione shook her head. "You wanted Harrenhal all but destroyed, so I'm going to head back and
help with demolition. Quite a few spells are useful for large explosions. It'll be fun to channel some
of my frustration, anyway."
"Frustration?" repeated Robb, perking up. Perhaps…?

"I fought Clegane - the Mountain - for a bit, but then he ran away," scowled Hermione, dropping her arms to clench her fists at her side.

Robb's heart stopped. "What?"

Hermione nodded, completely unaware of his growing horror, her eyes glowing with an inner fire that lit her amber eyes with an internal light. "I thought we had Tywin Lannister too, but the man snuck out. Merlin! We just missed him. But I got him, Robb, I swear I did - I hit him in the face with a *diffindo*. He'll wear my scar forever."

Robb struggled to breathe. *This*, he thought as he tried to calm his furiously racing heart, *this is why I don't like hearing you went into battle.*

As he struggled to find his words, Hermione mistook his silence, a stricken look overtaking the fierce look. "I'm so sorry, Robb," she said, quietly, glancing down at her hands. "I failed you. You were so upset and Edmure and I blotching your plan earlier, I thought I could fix it. And I didn't. I'm sorry."

"Hermione - I -"

But Hermione glanced back up, a tight smile on her lips. "It's okay. I'll fix it, I promise. I'm going to head back now," she rolled her eyes, "because Merlin knows I can't leave Torrhen alone for too long. he gets into trouble without me there to reign him in. And I still have a job to do!"

"Wait - Hermione -"

"I'll be back soon, Robb. Promise," she grinned, and then turned on her heel and disappeared. He was left standing in the cold, drafty hallway, staring at where she stood. He could feel the sympathetic glances Daryn was sending him, but it was nothing compared to the disappointment he felt.

Then, his dirty little sister poked her head around the partially open door. "Did Hermione already leave?"

Robb only nodded, turning to go back into his room.

*It seemed like she was always leaving, in some way,* he thought despondently. He thought back to his bathtub daydream and the warm amber eyes that looked back at him with - dare he think it? - *love*, and the words his fantasy woman said: "I'm glad I didn't leave," and wondered what it would take to actually hear those words come from Hermione's lips.

---

TBC...
Roose Bolton, the Lord of the Dreadfort, was participating in something as mundane as manual labour. Normally, he wouldn’t even deign to lift a single finger in sifting through rubble and collapsed, rotted wood beams, but his men were following the orders Lady Hermione had left before she Apparated back to Riverrun with Arya Stark.

Torrhen Karstark cheerfully followed the Lady’s commands, and that meant that those who had seen her fight -- and the man at her side fighting -- would rather follow the command than argue. No one wanted to be hit with the cool blue light that nearly killed Tywin Lannister.

Besides, Roose was pragmatic: he knew which side he’d rather be on.

Tywin Lannister might be a fellow practical bastard, rational and coolly collected and calm in the face of storms, but… he didn’t have a witch at his side.

To be fair, Roose wasn’t sure what to make of Hermione when he first met her. Initially, it was all talk; the young Stark and his men had returned, victorious, from their battle at the Whispering Woods, with an unconscious Jaime Lannister. They were silent, completely and utterly solemn as they worked through their own thoughts of what they saw. At least, until Eddard Karstark’s mouth began spilling his thoughts under the influence of milk of the poppy.

Rumours swirled around Riverrun in the days that followed -- that there was a woods witch that had helped them take down Jaime Lannister; that she lived in a tent in the forest; that she had unspeakable powers, strong enough to save a dying man.

Roose had scoffed -- scoffed -- because no woods witch had that kind of power! No woods witch was worth more than the few coppers spent on homemade remedies and draughts for upset stomachs, and even then, it was the small folk who would attend to a woods witch, as proper lords and ladies had their well-trained Maesters.

So he hid his disdain, hid his annoyance at having to travel back to the Whispering Woods with the young Stark leader and the annoying Karstarks, as well as that overgrown bloodthirsty twat, Umber -- if only to see the woods witch.

Only to have her shout, “I’m not buying whatever it is you’re selling!”

He hid his surprise well. The others, not so much (although, he noted with a beady look, that the young Stark was grinning widely).

The surprises kept coming: the moment he saw the young witch -- all curly brown hair and odd clothing but keen, sharp and shrewd eyes; the moment he entered the tent, only to be shocked at the difference in not only exterior but interior design; the moment she used her magic to float something as mundane and simple as drinks from her kitchen to the Stark!

He knew then he didn’t hide his surprise or admiration well -- because, well, his mind was working ahead.
Oh, he was no fool. Eddard Stark -- Ned, as he preferred -- was only a few years younger than he
was, and he was well acquainted with the Stark family. The Boltons were once the Kings of Winter,
the men who ruled the North with fear and blood, but that time had long passed but Roose kept his
eye on the Starks for the opportune moment.

He thought he found it: Ned Stark had been powerful, strong, silent but utterly merciless as he
demonstrated during Robert’s Rebellion with his clever and devious battle plans and then, later, his
cutting down of the entirety of Rhaegar Targaryan’s kingsguard while attempting to rescue his sister,
held captive in the Tower of Joy.

Robb Stark, on the other hand, while fairly devious and merciless as a military leader on the
battlefield, was rather… simple when it came to the same charisma and leadership abilities. He was
unable to broker alliances or maintain the same awe and strength his father employed to keep his men
under his control. Roose remembered shaking his head at the foolish deal Catelyn Tully -- for she
was a Southern woman who married into the North but still didn’t quite understand their ways fully -
had brokered with that odious Walder Frey.

But Lady Hermione -- well, Hermione Granger as it were; she was no highborn girl -- she was
something else. Different. Special.

Roose could see all the plans, all the ways she could improve the Northern army, the ways she could
strengthen his position in the North. The Boltons might never reach the same heights as they had
before (and he felt like he had pinned all his hopes on his dear Domeric, the Stranger take those who
killed his son) but she breathed the same life back into him.

And the looks Robb Stark kept sending her? Well. Perhaps his worded advice was a bit premature,
but with her at the young man’s side -- there was nothing that they wouldn’t be able to do.

Although --

Roose turned at the crack her Apparation made, and saw the young witch gently sway where she
stood in the middle of the inner courtyard. He strode across to her, ignoring the veiled looks his men,
as well as the few Frey men they had freed from the dungeons, sent her.

Hermione turned tired eyes on him, light bruising underneath that was magnified by the pale pallor of
her skin, and -- the father part of him he had long ago buried when he buried his son -- sighed in
worry.

“When did you last sleep?” he asked, pointedly.

Hermione -- she could no longer be Lady Hermione in his mind -- paused. “Umm…”

Bolton sighed, loudly. “There are bedchambers untouched from the fire in the far tower. I’ll have
Karstark escort you and stand guard outside the room.”

“I don’t need a guard,” the young witch protested, crossing her arms and scowling. “I can set up my
own protections.”

“Lady Hermione,” he began, as courtesies had to be followed, “You look like you’re about to
collapse.”

“Thanks. A lot,” muttered the witch, taking a step forward in a very uneven line.

Bolton frowned. “You can’t even walk straight. Were you like this in front of the King?” Please say
no, please say no. Because if you say “yes,” I’ll have to wonder what in the God’s name Stark was
“S’course not!” she retorted hotly, beginning to slur her words, uncrossing her arms to point a finger at him. It wavered back and forth a bit and he looked at it impassively. Hermione caught his look and tilted her chin up so her nose was pointed to the sky. “’M perfectly fine. Perfectly. Fine.”

“You are not,” replied Bolton, his voice low and hard. “Why?”

Hermione gave a careless shrug. “J’sabit tired, s’pose.” She frowned, focusing on the center of his chest. Bolton felt his worry increase. “Used t’much.”

“How?” Bolton was horrified. He had no idea she had a limited resource, but then again -- he had only seen her to little things over time. Looking back on it, in the past day, she had Apparated him and Karstark to his men, and placed glamours, holding the magic; then, she engaged in a fight with several men, did some other spellwork -- he mentally grimaced as he realized she hadn’t truly rested in some time.

Hermione began to move towards the tower, her wand out, but Bolton reached forward and caught her wrist, the one with the wand in her grip. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Karstark startle and move a few steps forward.

“No,” he said firmly, looking down at the curly-haired woman. “No magic for at least a day.” At her mutinous look, Bolton’s voice lowered, and he said, emphatically, “Please.”

They stared at each other for a few, brief moment, before Hermione’s face seemed to crumple in on her, and her shoulders hunched. Bolton took that as a victory, and turned, his eyes seeking out Karstark, watching the two of them warily.

At Bolton’s silent wave, the Karstark jogged over, concerned eyes racking over Hermione’s form. He then placed a hand on her back and began leading the young witch from the courtyard, head bent as he said something in her ear. Bolton watched carefully, eyes taking in the numerous others who were watching them -- ranging from Vorgas, his own man, a few other soldiers, the Frey men, as well as Princess Arya’s companions, Gendry and Hot Pie.

Once Karstark entered the base of the tower -- one of the few untouched by the recent fire -- Bolton turned back to the courtyard, and snapped, “Well? Back to work!”

The men jumped and continued their work, although curiosity burned in their eyes. Bolton sighed. It was going to be a long night.

There was something skewzy about waking up in a bed that Tywin Lannister also slept in, thought Hermione the next morning.

A soft, early morning light poured into the room through the open shutters. There were noises slowly filtering in from outside the tower -- repairs, minute ones at least -- and the shouts of some of the men as they began a watch rotation. It was chilly and breezy in the tower, despite being the most fortified and restored; without a burning fire, the room was nearly icy. However, Hermione, still under the covers, was toasty and warm.

Stretching, she sat up in the bed, brushing her wild curls off her face. She then made a face at the very red sheets around her. She wasn’t sure how well she’d take the bastardization of her beloved Gryffindor House colours with the knowledge it was also the colours of House Lannister. She
fingered the silky material and admitted that the man had good taste, at least; but that probably had something to do with the amount of gold he had.

With a yawn, Hermione cut her eyes to the far side of the room, where the man’s desk rested, filled still with loose paper and notes, a hurried mess that showed that he wasn’t expecting the attack the other night.

Hermione slipped from the bed, her bare toes touching the cold stone beneath her. She yelped, and scrambled for her wand (under the pillow), and quickly cast a nonverbal warming charm, not on the stone, but her feet. There was a soft tingling, and then she was able to touch the chilly floor with nothing but a gentle sigh.

She padded across to the desk, curiosity overtaking her as she began pushing through the stacks on top.

*Receipt, grain report… receipt… complaint from a vassal house… complaint, complaint, complaint,* she sighed. If this was a portion of what Robb had to go through on a daily basis, Hermione swore to herself she was going to introduce the idea of a Personal Assistant to Westeros, and find the equivalent to Percy Weasley and hire them.

*Hey, now, what’s this?* She shifted from the top letters to those buried underneath, eyes caught on words like *Stark, Baratheon, missing and ships.*

She pulled on the letter and began to read, quickly skimming it, and then rereading it a second time, slower. The letter detailed the disappearance of Stannis Baratheon, the last living male of the Baratheon line except a bastard of Robert’s somewhere; something about him ordering his fleet, numerous upon numerous ships, leaving Storm’s End. The letter was from a spy in the area, and had mentioned the possibility of Stannis and Robb forming an alliance.

*Hippogriff dung,* thought Hermione, knowing exactly what Robb’s plans were and it certainly wasn’t to curry favour with any Baratheons.

There was no reply -- as Tywin must have either sent it off before they arrived, or never got around to it -- but there were a few odd notes in the margin of the letter in a very spiky font: *WF - Disgruntled? and Who is M?*

Hermione scowled. *Great questions. Who is WF and why are they disgruntled -- or not? And who is M? I like that. Mysterious.* She sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. *I wish Arya was here. She was his cupbearer and might have a better insight into things. I’ll mention it to Robb to question her.*

Hermione then spent the better part of the morning in her underwear and a tank top, perched in Tywin Lannister’s desk chair, and began the odious task of organizing his letters. She transfigured an inkwell into the hard front and back of a binder, and then turned three quill pens into rings. She then began sorting through the parchment into categories.

“Lady Hermione--” Torrhen barged into the room, his eyes swinging around from the messy, unmade bed, to Hermione sitting at the desk. He strode forward, leaving the door open. “Are you hungry? What are you doing? Are those things Lannister left? What are you maki--GODS ABOVE!”

Hermione, rolling her eyes at his questions, stood from the chair and came around the desk to speak to her guard, completely forgetting her lack of attire.

The tall man turned on his heel, face beet red and staring out at the hallway. “My apologies, my Lady. I didn’t realize you weren’t properly ready!”
Hermione, blinking, looked down and then squawked. Being surrounded by men the majority of her time in Westeros reminded her far too much of her year on the run with Harry and Ron -- and living in a small tent meant that there were a few…. uncomfortable… moments over the months they were Horcrux hunting.

Hastily summoning her beaded bag and digging through for her jeans and socks, Hermione began jumping in place as she yanked one leg up first and then the other, nearly crashing into the desk and bracing herself against it.

Torrhen’s shoulder tensed at the sound of the crash and he visibly steeled himself from turning around.

“Sorry! Sorry! Cultural habit!” sputtered out Hermione, running her hands over her messy hair self-consciously and then down the front of the jumper she pulled out of her bag and then on top of her tank top. “I’m fine now, Torrhen.”

“You’re… decent?” he asked, hesitantly.

“Yes.”

He turned, eyes quickly darting to her and then away several times until he finally realized she was telling the truth and actually dressed. He sighed deeply, bowing low, bent almost half at the waist. “My apologies, again, my Lady,” he said, his voice partially muffled by the fact that his face was parallel with the floor.

Hermione stared. “Oh, get up, Torrhen. I highly doubt that I have anything you haven’t seen before.”

He blushed a furious red, and looked away. “Erm… Lady Hermione… shall we attempt the kitchens for a meal? And then Lord Bolton wishes to speak with you.”

Hermione nodded, feeling her own cheeks heat, and followed behind Torrhen as they left the tower.

Once beside, Hermione’s nose was assaulted with the stench of burning flesh and hair, and it made her gag. She brought the sleeve of her jumper to her mouth and nose and asked, “Torrhen! Good Merlin, what is that?”

Torrhen’s own face twisted in disgust. “It’s that Vargo Hoat and his -- Brave -- Companions, my Lady. They’re burning the dead.”

Hermione frowned behind the sleeve. “How many did we lose?”

“Not many,” replied the guard, glancing back at her over his shoulder and then waiting to have her drawn even with him. He seemed to quickly get over his embarrassment at catching her nearly naked. “Those they are burning are Lannisters.”

In the courtyard, Hermione saw many familiar Bolton men, making hasty, patchwork repairs in the barracks, and some Freys; but a great many of the men in the courtyard and around were dressed similar to Vorgas, in boiled leathers and with scraggy hair and lean, hungry looks to their eyes. She inched closer to her friend in response, especially when quite a few looked directly at her as they walked towards the kitchen.

Inside, Hot Pie was nervously puttering about, as were the other women with him. Hermione immediately felt worry creep into her chest.

“Penelope!” greeted Hot Pie enthusiastically. Then, he blushed and bowed shallowly, lowering his eyes and toning his enthusiastic call to a much more subdued tone. “Excuse me, milady.”
“Hi, Hot Pie,” greeted Hermione, ignoring the formalities. “D’you think Torrhen and I can grab something to snack on? I’m starved.”

Hot Pie had some meat pastries for them, and they ate while they walked. Torrhen directed Hermione to Bolton, who was standing with his arms crossed, two men at his side, discussing something in low tones as he oversaw the burning of bodies. One of the men Hermione knew -- Vorgas -- and the other she did not.

Hermione surreptitiously cast a bubblehead charm around her to keep the smell out, and then, with a glance at Torrhen’s rather pale face, did the same. His head jerked back in surprise at first, no doubt wondering what the barrier was around his face but when the stench disappeared, he glanced down at her and grinned.

Bolton saw their approach and turned partially towards her. “Ah, Lady Hermione. Karstark. Have you met Vargo Hoat? He and his men, the Brave Companions, had their own plan to attack Harrenhal from the inside. Vorgas was just explaining it to me.”

“I haven’t had the pleasure,” said Hermione, eyeing the lean man that stood next to Bolton. His black hair was long and slicked back from his forehead, hanging lankily at his shoulders. He had a long and narrow face, and a black goatee that hung down his chin -- nothing as prodigious as the breads Hermione saw in the wizarding world, but it was long enough that it looked odd compared to the bushy or neat trims the northern men wore.

His eyes, though -- the man’s dark eyes made Hermione shiver.

“My Lady,” the man said, his voice low and gravelly. His head gave a tiny, respectful dip, but he kept his eyes on her.

Torrhen’s jaw worked as he stared hard at the man. “Brave Companions? You mean sellswords. Mercenaries.”

Hoat shrugged, his s’s slipping into a slur. “A job s’a job, and money s’money.”

Hermione did her best not to let her thoughts show on her face, turning back to the large fire in the pit in front of her. Left were ashes and charred bones, having been raging for some time, but the smell lingered. Luckily, she couldn’t tell, and turned with half an ear to Bolton as he explained Hoat’s plan.

“He met with Vorgas and a few others, and helped smuggle in the Frey and Bolton men in the dungeons, similar to how we got in, as prisoners,” the Lord of the Dreadfort explained quietly. “It seems that Lorch was more than just a useless Castellan of Harrenhal -- he was unable to tell when he was being played.”

“Good thing Arya’s plan worked then,” commented Hermione idly. “She had inside help, and it seems like the two plans collided.”

“Indeed,” agreed Bolton, his thin lips quirking into a tiny smile. “The timing, along with ours, for quite fortuitous.”

“’S’hos’ wolves of yours,” began Hoat, eyeing Hermione, “’S’hey were helpful. Were s’hey real?”

Hermione shook her head. “No. I transfigured them. I used magic.”

Hermione coolly returned the gaze and replied, stiffly, “Something like that.”

Bolton glared at Hoat. “Where Lady Hermione hails from is hardly important, Hoat. You and Vorgas can finish the cleanup of the bodies and begin a perimeter. We have orders from the King that Lady Hermione and I need to prepare for.”

Vorgas nodded, and Hoat mulishly ran his hand down his goatee with a frown. However, both wandered away, leaving Bolton, Hermione, and Torrhen behind by the mass grave. Bolton glanced at the grave in disgust, and then turned and led Torrhen and Hermione away. “Have you had thoughts on destroying Harrenhal?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, but I’ll probably need some time to prepare -- rest and the like. It’ll take a lot out of me.”

“We have time,” said Torrhen, and then they were back in the original tower Tywin was using, their steps solid and echoing in the silent tower as they followed the curling stairs up to the different floors.

“Mmm,” agreed Bolton, following behind Torrhen and Hermione, who was leasing them. “And what did you get up to, this morning, Lady Hermione?”

Hermione launched into a detailed explanation of the letters and receipts she found on Tywin Lannister’s desk and her methodology of organizing them, all the while ignoring Torrhen’s red face, or Bolton’s slightly disapproving one as he glared at the guard.

However, upon seeing the binder she had made and her own added notes to each letter, Bolton was impressed, and forgot about whatever breach in decorum there might have been. He flipped through some of them, skipping past the first entries which were receipts and notaries from Lannister on who was providing them with what money from nearby villages -- blood tax, essentially -- and went straight to the correspondence.

“WF,” he mused thoughtfully. His finger traced the letters. “And this M -- King Robb should know of this, immediately.”

“I agree,” replied Hermione. “I can pop over and deliver it--”

“No,” said Bolton sharply.

Hermione frowned, resisting the urge to cross her arms or tap her foot in irritation. “Why not?”

“You should be recovering,” said Bolton firmly, glancing up at her from the book. “Does Apparation not take more energy from you than creating a Portkey? We shall send someone else to Riverrun with the book, as well as inform the King with the communication parchment.”

“I’m not that tired,” muttered Hermione.

“Lady Hermione, our orders were to destroy Harrenhal, and you said you’d need rest before that happens,” said Bolton sternly, while Torrhen quietly watched, his head moving back between the two as they spoke. “You are to limit your magic until then. Rest. Karstark will guard you and, if necessary, I can assign others if you feel uncomfortable without your magic.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s not like a switch, Lord Bolton. I can’t just turn on or off my magic -- it’s instinctive.” She sighed heavily. “But I’ll try to avoid it where possible.”

Bolton nodded, glancing at Torrhen. “Good. Now: who shall we send this with?”
A week later, Hermione was done with her Bolton-mandated, Torrhen-approved imposed week of vacation. She had significantly cut down on using her magic, and had spent the majority of her time either sleeping, eating, taking long baths in front of the fireplace to ward off the autumn chill that was settling deep in Westeros. When she wasn’t resting, she was spending time with Hot Pie in the kitchens, Gendry in the smithy (both on Arya’s request sent through her brother’s parchment), and Torrhen in the training square.

At first, Torrhen had suggested, that due to her size and skill with her wand, she should take up the non-magical defense of daggers.

A solid glare, including a pointed look at her left forearm, had him blanch and realize his mistake. He went away, thoughtful and chastised, and returned with a few other non-magical weapons that she could try her hand at: a bow and arrows, a short gladius-inspired sword like Dacey’s, a long, thin staff, and several swords of varying length and width. Hermione immediately discarded the morning star, hammer, and mace.

Although Hermione dislike them all, she dutifully spent a few hours every afternoon with Torrhen, learning the basic skills of each. He was waiting to see which she preferred or was proficient with; Hermione didn’t have the heart to tell him that she wasn’t fond of any of them and did her best to hide her distaste for their training.

With Bolton, Aenys Frey, Vorgas, and Hoat, Hermione often spent time discussing the plan for destroying Harrenhal totally, so that it couldn’t be used in the future by anyone.

Vorgas and Hoat were rarely at Harrenhal or in these meetings, often riding to various villages and houses, routing out Lannister supporters and returning with those to execute and coin purses filled with silver stags. Hermione never remained for the executions, just like the one she near-witnessed at the Crag.

Frey and Bolton, on the other hand, often brought up various points and suggestions until the three of them felt comfortable with the plan to move forward, once they heard back from Robb, who would give permission to proceed. Ultimately, it was decided that Vorgas and Hoat would remain nearby, continuing to find Lannister supporters and maintain a Northern presence in the area to deter Lannister forces from moving north -- the plan was to keep them south for as long as they could.

Bolton, some of his men, Aenys Frey, Hermione, and Torrhen would take a Portkey back to Riverrun once the destruction of Harrenhal was complete. Hermione had already created the Portkey, password-set to Torrhen only, as she knew she would be unable to activate it once she poured her strength into destroying Harrenhal.

Bolton and Frey had used Hermione’s knowledge of her world, and the well-stocked cellars and manure in the stables to create rudimentary explosives; the stinky and distasteful job meant that most were unhappy, either soaking rags or stuffing manure into empty canisters, and then strategically placing them around the large fortress.

Everyone was nervy, knowing that one small fire could destroy the entire place in a way different compared to dragonfire and time.

The day before Hermione’s combined Neville-and-Seamus-styled operation of blowing things up would commence, Hoat and Vorgas returned to Harrenhal, and threw a wrench into the plans.

“THOU THAID THAT I WOULD BE LORD OF THARRENTHAL!” Hoat screamed into
Bolton’s face, his lisp increased from his swollen tongue in his anger, and surrounded by his Brave Companions.

Bolton didn’t flinch at the accusation, standing firm and watching with a wary eye on the incensed man in front of him. Many of his own men were carefully watching him, and Aenys Frey stood off to the side with his arms crossed. All had their hands near their swords if it came to it. Hermione and Torrhen were slightly off to the side, near the smithy, as Hermione had been asking Gendry for help on the canister designs and going over the final pieces before they cleared out in the morning.

“I promised no such thing,” said Bolton, turning his head partially to Vorgas, who shifted under the man’s icy gaze. “Was that the price of your help to liberate Harrenhal? I thought you dislike Amory Lorch, regardless.”

Hoat sputtered something incomprehensible, his rage still purpling his face. In the end, he took his Brave Companions and left Harrenhal that evening.

Hermione sidled up to Bolton as he stood watching them leave through the gate, a tiny frown on his face.

“They might be a problem.”

“I’ll put up temporary wards for tonight, Lord Bolton,” said Hermione quietly. At his glance, she hurriedly added, “It won’t take much. We’ll still be fine for tomorrow.”

Bolton’s frown deepened. “Very well.”

However, neither were fully convinced that that was the last they had seen of Hoat.

At dawn, Bolton, Hermione, and Torrhen were the last to leave Harrenhal. Everyone had packed and moved what they could over the course of the week to the distant Bolton campsite further north, where Bolton, Hermione, and Torrhen had arrived. It overlooked Harrenhal, and from their current vantage point, the jutting towers of Harrenhal and its dark wash grey stone blended in with the dark pre-dawn sky.

Those who had been -- employed -- by Harrenhal were given the choice to remain in the Bolton camp, take the risk to return to their villages, or move on. Many remained in the camp for safety, but a few decided to try their luck elsewhere, including Hot Pie.

The teen nervously shifted on his feet, carrying a small bag Hermione had transfigured for him earlier that morning without Bolton’s notice, and had stuffed it with a few pastries and kitchen utensils that they had cleared out earlier.

Eventually, Hot Pie turned to Hermione and said, “It’s not that I don’t want to continue with Lord Bolton an’ his men, milady.” They were outside Harrenhal, far enough away that Hermione thought they would be protected but not too far, that her spells wouldn’t hit. “But I’m not meant for war, I think.”

He glanced at Gendry, stood just off to the side of her as well, trying his hardest not to draw any attention. Originally, Hot Pie had been sure that the burly teen would join him – as he was meant to go north to the Wall – but apparently, the lure of Arya Stark, and wariness of her ire, was enough to change his mind.
Hermione smiled -- she knew. Not everyone was a fighter; they had to find their own way. “Be safe,” she said instead. Hot Pie nodded, and he, along with the few who were moving beyond Harrenhal, turned and began the long trek northwest, towards the Inn at the Crossroads, deep in riverlands territory, and somewhere hopefully now safe from Lannister attacks.

“Ready?” Torrhen asked Hermione. In a fur-lined cloak, to ward off the early morning chill, covered him. Torrhen had a gloved hand resting on his hilt, but there was a relaxed half-smile on his face to indicate that he didn’t anticipate any trouble. Bolton stood off to his side, a row of archers from his men and Frey’s present. Neither would have anything more strenuous than watching Hermione, Harrenhal, and the archers for the next few hours.

Hermione turned to join them, facing the ruinous structure. The five towers jutted high into the grey dawn, and Hermione felt her lips flatten. *This is going to take some work. Best start at the walls, and then break things down from there.*

“Ready,” she said, drawing her wand with a flick. It rested comfortably and loosely in the palm of her hand. She rolled the handle back and forth as she took a deep breath.

Vorgas turned to face the archers and shouted, “ARCHERS. READY? STRING. NOCK. DRAW. HOLD.”

Hermione pointed her wand ahead and visualized she wanted: the destruction of Harrenhal. She knew that the entire structure would not be destroyed in a single blow, and she didn’t have any land restructuring spells handy in her beaded bag. All she had to do was ensure that there was no way an army could hold the location and use it strategically.

Visualizing the towers collapsing, the walls blown apart, Hermione, shouted, “*bombarda maxima!*

The spell burst from her wand, an electric zigzag of displaced air. It flew across the dewy grass, like the warmth of a hazy summer day until hit the gate and outer wall. The resulting explosion was deafening, even to those who were quite far away. Bits of stone and masonry went everywhere, high into the sky and sideways and a large dust cloud kicked up in the wake of the burst wall. Rocks landed heavily in the earth around them with heavy, dangerous thuds, creating dents in the hard earth around the fortress.

“*Bombarda maxima!*” she shouted again, and this time the spell soared through the opening made by the outer gate, into the courtyard beyond and past her vision. There was another explosive, this time one with a burst of fire as her spell hit one of the canisters. White smoke mixed with the dark grey of the burst stone and rock, and a thin layer of chalky white began to float down and coat the green grass around Harrenhal.

Then Hermione shouted, again, and again, and again: “*bombarda maxima!*”

At some point, Vorgas had been given the order from Bolton, and flaming arrows soared above them and into the various parts of the fortress, all chosen ahead of time from where there were large concentrations of their homemade explosives. Even as Hermione’s magic and spells blew the heaviest pieces apart, the resulting explosion when the flaming arrows hit their targets rocked the earth. A blast of hot air blew past and Hermione swayed where she stood, utterly exhausted. Her eyes drooped and she jerked her head up to focus on Harrenhal, to watch it burn. The towers collapsed under a large, swirling orange flame, and smaller explosions continued to erupt in tiny *booms* every so often. Smoke billowed in the sky and coated the light blue of the morning with the dark smudge, wafting gently away from where they stood.

They stood for several hours, watching, silently, as the old castle continue to burn, with Hermione
shooting spells it at every so often. Eventually, she aimed for the foundation with the same spell, her voice hoarse and scratchy. That, beyond anything, finally helped the large, old building to topple inwards, loudly, creating air pockets and further explosions as the fires continued to burn and feed into one another.

By the time the sun was high in the sky, and the dark smudge of smoke had thinned, Harrenhal was no more.

Quietly, Bolton spoke for the first time in hours. “It’s over. It’s time to go.”

Exhausted, Hermione could only nod. She couldn’t speak, and just swallowing felt like she swallowed glass. There was a white pallor to her skin, from exhausting herself magically, and her hands trembled as she slid her wand back into its holster.

Torrhen propped her up at her side, an arm around her and hugging her to his side securely. Hermione gave an inaudible sigh and closed her eyes as she leaned against his hard body, dizzily reaching out to touch their Portkey back to Riverrun. The Portkey was a long, rectangular Bolton banner of the Flayed Man, and everyone reached out to touch it, either by fisting a part of the fabric or gingerly pinching it between two fingers.

Torrhen glanced around to ensure everyone had a part of the fabric. There weren’t too many people with them: about ten archers with sore arms, Bolton, Gendry, Torrhen and Hermione.

With a nod from Bolton, Torrhen clearly said, “Tully blue.” What felt like a hook behind their navels grabbed hold of them and yanked them off their feet in a swirl of colour. They were gone.

TBC...
Chapter Notes

There are recognizable lines from the following episodes in this chapter: 2x08 ("Prince of Winterfell"), 3x02 ("Dark Wings, Dark Words"), 3x03 ("Walk of Punishment") and 3x07 ("the Bear and the Maiden Fair"). Some lines have been altered and changed to suit the story. Lines given to the character of Locke in the show were given to Hoat.

The Winter Witch XV

For the first time in eight months, since Hermione had appeared in Westeros, things were quiet. The destruction of Harrenhal - well, as much as they could destroy it, thought Hermione ruefully - was the last major campaign that Robb had planned. There was downtime, but importantly, training for soldiers under his banner.

Robb was catching up on paperwork and planning his next moves with input from his Lords and council, but everyone was watching what Stannis Baratheon would be doing. The man and his fleet had disappeared from Storm's End, and the information Hermione brought back in her binder helped support that from their spy network. The question was where was he going: North, or South?

In the meantime, the servants of Riverrun were kept busy as Robb's twentieth birthday - Nameday in Westeros - was approaching. A three-day banquet was being prepared for the King's honour, and while Catelyn would have once-upon-a-time been helping, Robb had forbidden her from doing so. The resulting argument had been heard two floors down and one floor up from where she was confined to her bedchambers or her father's, where he was on his deathbed.

Hermione, who had been in her bedchamber, on the same floor as the Stark family, perked up at the sound of angry shouting. She stood from her desk where she was browsing several of her Hogwarts-pilfered texts; she had an idea for Robb and his men to return north, but wanted to ensure all her notes were fully compiled before presenting them.

"-would not allow it, and you did it anyway!"

Robb's voice grew louder and angrier.

She shared a glance with Torrhen, who sat in one of the chairs near the fireplace, constantly with her as her guard. He frowned and stood from the chair, not going for his sword that rested against the wooden structure, but for his present dagger. Just because they were in a supposedly safe environment didn't mean that he shouldn't be on his guard.

"I did it for the girls! I have five children, and only two of them are free!" Catelyn's voice was pleading.

Robb let out a humourless laugh. "And why is that, Mother? I was free due to circumstance, and Arya is only here because of Lady Hermione!"

The voices were not growing louder, but they were clear.
Another voice interjected, and Hermione realized with a start it was Lord Karstark, speaking disdainfully to his King's mother. "I lost one son fighting by your son's side - Harrion is a prisoner of the Lannisters, and the Stranger knows whether he is alive or not! You committed treason, because your children are prisoners? I would carve out my heart and offer it to the Father, if he would let my Harrion free and walk through the main gate of Riverrun tomorrow!"

There was silence, and then, Catelyn said, quietly, making Hermione strain to hear, "I grieve for your son, My Lord…"

She shook her head. *Bad idea, Catelyn. Bad idea.*

"We don't want your grief. We want vengeance!" it was another voice that spoke and Hermione frowned, trying to place it. It wasn't a Riverlands Lord - she was familiar with most of them through Blackwood and Bracken at this point; so it was perhaps a Northern lord?

"Killing Jaime Lannister - or any other Lannister we have as a prisoner - would not buy freedom to your Harrion, Lord Karstark," said Catelyn stiffly. "But returning him to King's Landing free of marks and mutilation may buy life for my Sansa." There was a pause, and then she added frostily, "You do remember that she is now Princess?"

Hermione sucked in air quickly through her teeth and shared another look with Torrhen, who looked torn between sharing her sentiments of Catelyn's chosen retort, and accidentally eavesdropping on his King.

"We've discussed this before, Mother," said Robb, his voice low and still thrumming with anger. "Jaime Lannister has played you for a fool. You have weakened our position; you brought discord into our camp; and you did all behind my back."

"I did this for you!" snapped Catelyn. "For the girls, for our family!"

Robb scoffed loudly. "Mother, this conversation goes around in circles; it hasn't changed. You believe in your point and I believe in mind. I have not changed my mind. You will remain under house arrest, in your chambers or in Grandfather's. You will remain guarded at all times."

"I cannot even join you at your council?"

There was a moment of incredulous silence.

"Why in the God's would you be *allowed* to sit on the council after your poor decisions?" asked Robb eventually. There was a rustle of clothing. "No. No, Mother, you are just lucky that no one has asked for your execution."

Catelyn gasped.

There was the sound of several boots and the rustle of skirts, and then a door, far down the hall, slammed shut. Hermione eased forward and poked her head out of the door to her room - something she left open, often now, as Arya came by when she could - and saw Robb standing with Rickard Karstark, Greatjon Umber, Brynden Tully, Maege Mormont, his kingsguard, and the unknown Lord Hermione was not familiar with - Robartt Glover.

"Do we have plans or any news regarding the Kingslayer?" asked Robb, his voice tired.

Umber paused. "Nothing yet."

"And how many men did we send on pursuit of him?" he asked, closing his eyes and rubbing his
forehead with the curled edge of his fist.

"Forty, Your Grace," said Glover.

Robb sighed. "Send another forty, with our fastest horses."

"Yes, Your Grace."

He then turned, and saw Hermione watching quietly. With a low murmur, he excused himself from the group; Mormont, Karstark, and Umber turned to complete his orders - Karstark giving Hermione a smile and polite nod -, with Glover a step behind them but with an unreadable glance over his shoulder. Tully sighed, and turned towards Catelyn's chambers to speak with her.

"Lady Hermione," greeted Robb, reaching forward for her hand and giving her a bow over it.

"Robb," greeted Hermione in response, turning a bit. "Want to come in? I might have a plan for Jaime Lannister."

Curious, Robb stepped past her into her chambers, nodding at Torrhen who relaxed his hold on the dagger and then moved to stand by the door as Robb and Hermione went to her desk.

"Are these all your texts?" asked Robb curiously, flipping to the cover on one and reading the title, "Wards for the Wary Wizard?"

Hermione grinned. "Yes - the magical world has a thing for alliteration, but also protection. Especially since, we were through two wars in less than twenty years. Wards are… invisible domes of protection, I suppose. I can weave them into a property and they serve all manner of purposes."

"Like Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge," said Robb, eyes flicking to hers.

"Just so," she replied with a grin.

"And this will help with the Kingslayer?" asked Robb, turning back to the book.

Hermione rolled her lower lip into her mouth and began chewing it, shaking her head. "Erm, not quite. I was thinking of wards for the issue of the Riverlands not being protected when you go north - so, a side project, really. No, I think it's best that when we get Jaime Lannister back, I ward him into a singular room and only key it to me. This way we can eliminate any variables. But I meant about finding him." She pulled one book from a stack, and handed it to him. "Here."

Robb took the book, reading the title aloud and then opening it to the page Hermione had bookmarked. "Finding the Forgotten. Which passage?"

Hermione crowded next to him, leaning forward and pressing into his arm as she pointed out the relevant passage. At her side, Robb inhaled sharply, looking down at her and her curly hair pulled back and held together with her numerous quills - a throwback to when he saw her in her tent, so long ago. He felt himself blush and struggled to focus on the relevant passage.

"This one," she was saying. "See? It says that I can use something left over of his - blood, if we have it is best, or hair if not - and I can scry." She made a face. "I don't particularly like the idea of using Divination, especially to find his location. I'm pretty sure we don't have blood, so I can't make another map like I did for your siblings. With hair, I might be able to do a one-time scry, but I'll want to do an arithmetic equation first for success."

"I will ensure you can come and go from the room we had him imprisoned in freely," said Robb.
"What will this... 'scry' do?"

Hermione shrugged, her shoulder rubbing against him. "I'll either have a vision of him and where he might be, or I'll see it in a dream." She frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe in a bowl of water?" She hummed under her breath and leaned forward over the desk, reaching for a book called *Unfogging the Future,* and muttering about Trelawney and useless bint.

It seemed like she had entirely forgotten that he was there, standing next to her. Robb smiled fondly down at her, with Hermione unable to see the softening of his face. She was really quite remarkable, his tiny little witch. She had helped him so much, and he knew that his thoughts and feelings toward her were not at all friendly, but something more.

However, his mother's deal with Walder Frey hung over him like an executioner's sword, a reminder that he promised to marry one of Frey's many daughters, or granddaughters, or great-granddaughters, and elevate her to a Queen in return for his help and the ability to cross the Trident. He could not forget that, and even if he wanted to tell Hermione how he felt, it would not dishonour her.

But still - he sought her company. He *liked* her. She wanted to please, be helpful, but she also had a hard edge to her that he did enjoy, as well.

His eyes drifted from the top of her curly brown hair, the woman completely lost in her research as she muttered to herself and reached for a quill and inkpot to scribble notes, to Torrhen, who was watching them with a knowing look in his eyes.

Robb immediately snapped to attention and stood straight.

He cleared his throat and stepped back, leaving the warmth and heat of Hermione's body. "How much time do you need for this scrying, Hermione?"

"What?" her head popped up. "Oh! Um. I don't know - maybe an hour or two? I can do the equation now. I just need his hair, I guess. The spell isn't hard."

"Very well," said Robb, giving her a small smile. "I shall leave you to continue your work."

Hermione took an unconscious step forward and in his direction. "Oh! No - I mean - you don't have to go -"

"I have a few other things to work on; correspondence and training," said Robb gently, pleased that she wanted to spend time with him. "Perhaps you'll be free this afternoon? Before evening meal? We could go for a stroll around the gardens and you can tell me your plan for these wards and how it'll help."

Hermione beamed. "Of course. Until later, then."

Robb itched to stretch forward and affectionately touch her cheek in response. Instead, he bowed his head and said, "Until then."

Torrhen waited until Robb left the room to speak. "Why don't you two just kiss, already?"

"Oh, shut up, Torrhen," snapped Hermione, blushing a furious pink across her cheeks and neck, turning back to her books.

A few hours later, Arya decided that following Hermione was far more interesting than the needlepoint lesson her mother had scheduled for her. Hermione, who had several sheets of notes for
the attempted scry, decided that it was best to cast the spell while in Jaime Lannister's room-slash-cell, the place he spent the most time in while at Riverrun.

"What's this going to do?" asked Arya, keeping up with Hermione's long strides. Hermione had given her a conjured container for any collections of the Kingslayer's hair. The young teen was all legs and arms and barely reached Hermione's shoulder, but moved with the unconscious grace of a dancer - or, thought Hermione, a rather dangerous girl who has killed and seen battle.


"How?"

Hermione refrained from sighing as Arya peppered her with questions. Behind her, Torrhen stifled a snicker. "I'm going to use something from him - like a piece of hair - and cast the spell. The spell itself is a form of Divination-" she couldn't help but wrinkle her nose here "-and it will allow me to see from his eyes briefly. My plan is that, if I can see where he is, I can either Apparate to him, or create a Portkey and bring a few others with me to capture him."

"Capture?" Arya wrinkled up her nose and spat the word out. "Why not kill him?"

Hermione stopped and stared at the dark-haired girl at her side. "Well, why kill him?"

Arya stared at her, her steely grey eyes meeting Hermione's. The witch felt a frisson of something zing up her spine in response. There was something otherworldly about her eyes. After a few beats, Hermione turned and continued walking towards the room Jaime Lannister had been imprisoned in.

The room was still bare - just a lumpy mattress and a few chairs and side tables. However, the pillows and sheets were still on the bed, and Hermione counted that as a win. Torrhen stood by the door, watching.

Arya hovered in the doorway. "Now what?"

Hermione tossed her hair over her shoulder as she grinned at the young Stark girl. "Wanna see some magic?"

The answering grin on Arya's face had Hermione chuckle. Her wand slid smoothly into her waiting hand, and, posing dramatic like a conductor, Hermione held her wand aloft. Then, with a delicate flick, Hermione used nonverbal magic to pinpoint any remnants of Jaime Lannister's DNA. A few pieces here and there began to glow, predominantly on the bed - by the pillow - and a few on the floor near the fireplace.

With precision, Hermione floated a few pieces of glowing DNA towards her, and Arya, eager to be her helper, raced forward. She held the container under one of the glowing pieces, looking like a hovering glow-worm, and watched with wide eyes as Hermione used her wand to direct the piece into the container. They did this a few times until Hermione had collected what was left in the room.

"Excellent," she said, pleased, with a smile on her face. "Now, let's get the bowl and fill it with water."

Torrhen turned to the hallway, calling for a nearby servant to help, and then asking for water. Hermione found a nice spot in the middle of the room and sat cross-legged. Arya copied her on the other side, nearly vibrating in excitement.

As they waited, Hermione had Arya place the contained at the side, and Hermione eyed the pillow on the bed. With a deft flick of her wrist, the pillow zoomed through the air and she caught it,
eliciting a gasp from Arya and wide, wide eyes. A tap on the pillow had it transfigure into a shallow, beige coloured bowl that went in front of Hermione on the floor, between the two females.

Soon, a maid hurried into the room, carrying a pail of water that sloshed as she walked. "Where would you like the water, milady?" she asked, turning to Hermione.

"Just here is fine, thank you, Aleson," said Hermione, smiling winningly at the maid who curtseyed and smiled back, pleased that Hermione remembered her name.

"Of course, milady," said Aleson, "And if there's anything else you need, milady?"

"No, I'm good," said Hermione, and the girl disappeared.

Across from her, Arya was snickering, trying hard to bury her face in her shoulder. "It's like you say 'jump' and they wonder 'how high'!"

Hermione sighed. "I know. And I've tried correcting them a hundred times to just call me 'Hermione,' but it's always 'Lady Hermione' this or 'milady' that."

Arya tilted her head. "Are you not Lady Hermione though?"

Hermione shook her head. "Where I come from, I'm just Hermione Granger. If you want to put any titles on me, I hold an Order of Merlin, First Class medal, and a professor once called me the Brightest Witch of my Age. But my parents are dentists - specialized tooth Maesters - and we're certainly not titled in any way."

"Who started calling you Lady Hermione then?" asked Arya, fascinated. "And don't you like it? All the girls, like Sansa, love being called 'milady' and wearing dresses and thinking about knights and songs! Yuck!"

Hermione grinned. "I will admit there's something about dressing up and looking and feeling great," she began, thinking back to the reactions she got at the Yule Ball on Viktor's arm, or the red dress she wore to Bill and Fleur's wedding, "But overall, I'm not a girly-girl. And as for who began calling me that… it was your brother."

Arya rolled her eyes. "Of course it was Robb."

"What does that mean?" asked Hermione, using her wand to balance the heavy pail and pour the water into the bowl.

"Nothing," replied Arya, eyes following the trail of water coming from the hovering pail.

Hermione huffed but didn't speak, concentrating on her magic doing the task she wanted. Once the bowl was filled, she nodded at the container, and Arya nudged it with her foot closer to Hermione.

From there, a single strand of blond hair rose and hovered above the bowl. Then, the glow began to turn golden, and it disintegrated, the particles floating down like large pieces of snow into the water. With her finger, and some wandless magic, Hermione gestured in tiny circles and the particles swirled together.

Then, she leaned over her crossed legs and peered into the clear water, peering intently. According to the book she read, she had to 'clear her mind' - so very Occlumency - and concentrate on the person she was searching for. The images might be clear, or not. Water scrying was tricky, fickle. She needed to be calm, centered, and at peace with herself.
Distantly, she heard Arya shift, or move, but Hermione focused on the bottom of the shallow bowl, her eyes nearly going cross-eyed as she did so. After a bit, she felt her breathing deepen, and her limbs relax. Her hands, on her knees, shifted to the side and her fingers slowly relaxed their tense grip.

The clear, white-blue of the water began to deepen, turning dense, cloudy and murky. The murky blue turned into green, and black began to bleed into the watery image.

Distantly, Hermione could hear voices.

"it doesn't matter how loyal a servant you are, no one enjoys the company of a humorless mute. Trust me on this. People have been serving me since I was born. You think Lady Stark is going to want a giant towheaded plank following her around for the rest of her life? A week's journey with you and she'll order you to fall on your sword."

"If Lady Stark is unhappy with any aspect of my service, I'm sure she'll let me know. She's an honest woman."

Honest, but dumb, thought Hermione, eyes narrowing. The blue and black and green swirled together, and two spots of white-yellow began to appear from within. But the colours were flickering - like something was shadowed or illuminated briefly, on alternating times.

"For all the good it's done her. How did you come into Lady Stark's service? There's something we can talk about."

"Not your concern, Kingslayer."

Ah, thought Hermione. I've got you. her eyes narrowed further on the water, and she willed it to show her the truth, show her where Jaime Lannister and Brienne of Tarth were.

The colours spread and twisted until they began to resemble things she recognized: the swaying of leaves on trees, the fire in a shallow pit between two large figures, and then, eventually, the gleaming gold of Jaime Lannister's armour.

"It had to be recently," the Kingslayer was saying. "You weren't with her at Winterfell."

"How would you know?" asked a suspicious Brienne.

Jaime Lannister scoffed. "Because I visited Winterfell. I would have noticed your dour head smacking into the archways. " There was a pause. Then: "Were you pledged to Stannis?"

Brienne made a face. "Gods, no."

Understanding lit across the Kingslayer's. There was an expression that reminded Hermione of Malfoy knowing something that Harry didn't, and was ready to taunt him with. "Ah, Renly. Really? He wasn't fit to rule over anything more important than a 12-course meal."

Anger stole across Brienne's face. And something else. "Shut your mouth."

Their features began to sharpen; Hermione could make out the pallid colour on Brienne's face, with two splotches of distinct red - from anger, or embarrassment - on her cheekbones. Her pale eyes were narrowed on Jaime Lannister, who despite being in shackles, seemed completely at ease leaning against a shoulder-height boulder that jutted from the ground. He had one knee bent and pressed near his chest.

The man laughed, scornfully, disdainfully. "Why? I lived with him at court since he was a boy, don't forget. Could hardly escape the little tulip skipping down the corridors in his embroidered silks. I
knew him far better than you."

Pride shone on Brienne's face. "I knew him as well as anyone. As a member of his Kingsguard, he trusted me with everything. He would have been a wonderful king."

Their faces and their surroundings began to fade, their voices growing distant again, as though Hermione was listening to them from under water.

"Sounds like you quite fancied him," the young Lannister was saying.

There was a sharp retort, cutting through the fog. "I did not fancy him."

"Oh, gods, you did. Did you ever tell him? No, of course not. You weren't Renly's type, I'm afraid. He preferred curly-haired little girls like Loras Tyrell. You're far too much man for him."

"I'm not interested in foul rumors."

"Unless they're about me. It's all true-"

The colours bled out and then continued to swirl in the bowl until they began to bleed out, like a painter adding too much water to their paint and watching as the colour drained out, leaving a pale wash behind. Eventually, the water turned clear once more.

Hermione let out a giant sigh, feeling her limbs protest as she straightened her back. What had been a mid-day sun was now gone; the room she was in was barely lit, with the only light coming from the fireplace and a candelabra placed on the side table. In the darkened room, Hermione let her eyes adjust the new, low light, and spotted several shadowed figures, including one pacing.

"Hermione!"

She started, and turned, using a hand on the floor to brace herself.

Robb rushed forward and knelt on the hard floor in front of her, his blue eyes wide and concerned. His hair was disheveled, and Hermione could see how tense he was with the tightness around his eyes and the flattening of his lips in a straight line.

"Robb?" even Hermione's voice was weak.

At her other side, Arya crept forward, peering anxiously into Hermione's face. "Hermione, are you well? You were staring into that bowl for ages!"

"Ages?" repeated Hermione, glancing at Arya. "How long…?"

Robb ran a hand through his hair. "Hours, Hermione, hours." His hand rose and touched her cheek, softly, fluttering, and then quickly retreating to his side where he clenched it into a fist.

"I-" Hermione stopped and looked around. At the door, serving as guard, was Daryn Hornwood and Dacey, while Torrhen was the one pacing.

As her eyes fell on Torrhen, the tall Karstark stopped pacing and stepped forward, just as Arya gripped Hermione with her tiny hands and together they rose, even though Hermione was awfully shaky.

"What were you thinking?" her guard demanded, gripping both her shoulders in his hands and shaking her. Arya hastily stepped back, but her eyes remained on Torrhen's form, a small snarl on her lips. Torrhen did not notice, even though Robb stood nearby. The king had a strange look on his
"Not a princess," the girl in question muttered, crossing her arms.

"And whatever you were doing with your magic could have harmed you!" continued Torrhen, his voice rising sharply. "None of us have magic, my Lady! None of us can help you if something happens!"

"Torrhen, it wasn't anything dangerous-"

"You always say that!" there was something desperate on the edge of Torrhen's words. "You always push yourself ahead of everyone and everything else, Lady Hermione! You have literally collapsed in front of me from magical exhaustion! Twice!"

"What?" barked Robb, glancing between the two with shock on his face.

"It's fine-"

"The hell it is!" snapped Torrhen, stepping back and running an aggravated hand over and down his face. He turned and placed his back to her, as well as his King and Arya, a significant faux pas in royal etiquette.

Robb, in a slightly strangled voice, asked, "Hermione? Is this true? Are you... exhausting yourself with your magic as you help us?"

Hermione turned to Robb, eyes wide. "No!"

Torrhen scoffed.

"Not really," amended Hermione, throwing a hasty glance in his direction. "I'm not - I'm not used to using so much magic. At Hogwarts, it's ambient - just always there in the background for us to soak up and rest. This is the most I've used magic in quite some time - since the battle of Hogwarts, anyway. I just have to get used to it."

Robb's eyebrows drew together.

"Really, Robb," said Hermione, softening her voice deliberately, "I'm fine."

"You fell unconscious after warding both Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge, and when you Apparated back to Harrenhal, you nearly collapsed onto Lord Bolton," interrupted Torrhen angrily. He swung around to face her again, and Hermione's eyes drew back to her friend. "You can't tell me that is you not being used to using magic, my lady."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably as all eyes swung back around to her. "Um..." Her eyes were wide as she looked at everyone in the room: Dacey looked unforgiving, raising a single dark eyebrow in response to Hermione's eyes cutting to her first, a female ally. Then, Daryn, who looked unmoved, his eyes moving from hers to Torrhen and Robb. Her two closest male friends in Westeros were both looking thunderous, although a vein at Torrhen's temple was pulsing in his anger. Robb, however, while looking annoyed, was fidgeting nervously as he glanced between her and Torrhen. Arya, the last of those in the room with them, was watching the reactions of those around her carefully, as though filing everything for later use.

"Look, I promise to take better care of myself, okay?" said Hermione eventually, turning to Torrhen briefly, before looking back at Robb. Her eyes met his, and she marvelled for a moment at the deep,
dark blue. Her breath caught and her heart started pounding in her chest.

"I really am sorry," she said quietly. "I'm usually the one planning things and staying on top of them, not really worrying about myself." She looked up at him earnestly. "I know my limits, Robb. I do."

His eyes were flicking between hers, reading her. At one point, he glanced over at a hovering, irate Torrhen, and his features slipped - into a tiny scowl - but when he looked back at her, they softened. Finally, he sighed. "You know better than us your limits with magic, Hermione."

"I do. I promise I'll stop pushing myself to the edge, though," she said. "It doesn't do anyone any good if I do that."

There was a stricken look on Robb's face. "Hermione - we don't - that is - I don't -" He swallowed and looked away, his jaw tense. When he looked back, he said, firmly, "We don't keep you around just because you're good at magic, my Lady. We like you here. You have a place here, with us." With me seemed to go unsaid, but Hermione wasn't sure if she was reading too much into his unspoken words. "You don't need to prove anything."

"Well..." said Hermione, trailing off and grinning slightly, "That's good to know. Can I tell you I know where Jaime Lannister is now?"

In the end, Hermione created a Portkey using the image from her scrying. Torrhen was going with her, as was Dacey. Torrhen had argued for more to join them, but Hermione had argued that more would alert Brienne and the Kingslayer that they were onto them.

Eventually, Robb agreed, leaving the two to guard Hermione, represented Robb as King in the North and Protector of the Trident, and for Hermione to be the one to capture the Kingslayer with her magic.

Hermione didn't think it would be as easy as the first time, especially when they were known to the Kingslayer. Worse, she thought as they landed, her with her bent knees, Torrhen swaying on the spot and slightly used to Portkey travel, and Dacey kneeling on the ground, dazed - was how far south they were.

Although trees surrounded them, and there was a blackened fire pit at their feet, Hermione was familiar enough with the landscape around them: the jagged rolling green hills, the boulders, and the long, swaying grass.

"Are we where I think we are?" asked Torrhen, grimly.

Hermione nodded.

"Well, for those of us who don't know," said Dacey, eyeing them both, "Where are we?"

Hermione sighed. "Harrenhal."

"What?" gaped the other woman. Her dark eyebrows shot up and she shook her long brown hair. "Are you serious? How do you know?"

Torrhen pointed towards the clearing; where there were several muddy tracks and churned earth. "This was where the Bolton army was."

"Come on," said Hermione, looking down at where Harrenhal once stood. There were several large remnants of the original foundations, and several rocky outcrops that were once low lows and partial
rooms, but it looked more like the crumbling remains of a building thousands of years old than the burned-out shell Harrenhal had been several weeks ago. The grass around the building was still tainted and tinged white and brown in places from chalky rock and fire. Without the jarring towers of Harrenhal to mar the landscape, it was obvious that the riverlands was fundamentally changed with the destruction.

"Why are we going there?" whined Dacey. "I thought you said the Kingslayer was here, near this clearing."

"Half the reason Robb wanted us to destroy Harrenhal was to ensure that people couldn't camp out and use Harrenhal as a defense. As a building, it was too large and too destroyed to keep functioning," explained Hermione as she began to walk towards the ruin, stepping carefully over loose stones. Torrhen reached forward and helped her over some tricky spots. "However, as you can see, it's still providing enough shelter."

"You think he's there?" asked a surprised Dacey, bringing up the rear.

Hermione shook her head. "I know. See that plume of smoke? Someone made camp in what's left."

"I thought the whole point of destroying Harrenhal was to avoid that from happening," accused Dacey, her eyes dark.

Hermione, looking at the other woman over her shoulder as Torrhen moved ahead to pick his way down several large boulders, sighed. "It would've taken a few extra days to pulverize what remained into tiny rocks, Dacey. We did what we could in the period we had. But what remains of Harrenhal is nothing substantial - and certainly nothing with a roof or solid walls. There might be one strong half-wall someone can rest against, but to protect them from the elements? No, this is a pit stop now."

"Pit stop?"

"A technical and slang term for a location where race car drivers - you know what?" Hermione caught herself. "Never mind. It's not important."

As the day grew darker, the three fell silent and walked in single file towards the ruins, where the plume of smoke had deepened. They kept walking until they could duck behind what was once the outer wall and gatehouse of Harrenhal, kneeling on the damp grass and peering over the edge of the grey stones to look within. Here, they were close enough to see the flickering flame of light around several further low remaining walls that made part of the interior courtyard - somewhere Hermione guessed was partially the kitchens, as it had been sunken.

Smartly tapping Torrhen on the head, Hermione cast a disillusionment charm on him and then Dacey, who muffled a shriek at the sensation of cracked egg running down the back of her neck. Hermione then silenced their feet with a silencio pointed at their boots and her trainers.

"This is brilliant!" enthused a nearly invisible Dacey, who was looking at her hand warp the landscape and colours of the ground around her, as though she blended right in.

"But it won't keep us quiet," cautioned Hermione, knowing that Torrhen was sending the other woman a bemused look, as he was now a deft hand at magical responses. "So we should keep our talking to a minimum."

"Very well," agreed Dacey.

"To interrupt," said Torrhen, his voice grim, "I just want to mention - the fact that we're still out of sight and can see a flame is worrisome. That's awfully large for just two people."
Hermione frowned. "I agree. Give me a moment."

"What are you going to do?" asked Torrhen quietly.

"I'm going to cast *homo in revelo,*" said Hermione, and she flicked her wand. The colourless spell washed across the ground, and tiny pinpricks of red and green and yellow - all representing different things - began to ping through her foggy vision.

Torrhen grinned. "Ah, I remember this! You used it at Stone Hedge, when the room was full of smoke to see where the Lannister soldiers were."

Hermione didn't answer. Her eyes darted back and forth, as she catalogued what was in front of her, just beyond the half wall by the kitchens, inner courtyard, and the pit where Vargos and Hoat had burned the Lannister bodies. She scowled.

"What is it?" whispered Dacey.

"You're not going to believe this," muttered Hermione, her voice dark. She cancelled the spell and turned to where Dacey and Torrhen were, the outline of their bodies shimmering in the dark. "There's *at least* twenty people there! One is in the pit, alive, but with an animal of some sort!"

"An animal?" repeated Torrhen, aghast. "In a pit? The same pit where…?"

"Well," said Dacey, strangely cheerful, "This does change things. Has the Kingslayer met up with other Lannister soldiers, you think?"

Loud laughter swept across the ground then, strong enough that it startled the three of them. Then, there were jeers and laughs - Hermione could ever swear she heard them singing some song about a bear and a maiden.

Hermione sighed. "Only one way to find out."

Then, she crept forward, around the outer wall. She felt the air behind her move as Torrhen followed, and then Dacey. The three kept to the shadows as much as they could, Torrhen and Dacey moving instinctively like they were not disillusioned under a spell.

Torrhen eased past Hermione, going first, with a slight touch to her shoulder. They crept over rubble and up a series of half-broken and collapsed stairs that were once part of the wall - probably something that led to the second floor. They used the high ground to gain an elevated view of what was beyond the wall. When they rounded the corner of the stairs at the highest wall that separated them from the courtyard, Hermione stifled a gasp at what she saw.

The pit that they had burned the Lannister bodies in had been cleared out of corpses, and no longer resembled a mass grave. Instead, what wooden beams were salvaged from the destruction spells and the fire had been used to create two walkways overtop the pit. The pit itself had been deepened, and was now being used as a sunken arena.

And in that arena, was Brienne of Tarth in a ripped and bloodied dress that was ill-suited for her large frame, a wooden sword in front of her as her only means of defence. Her neck was gashed by three long scratches from an animal's paw swipe, and the blood dripped down her collarbones and onto the deep burgundy dress. Across from her, muzzle bloody and snarling with saliva dripping, was a large black bear.

Around the pit, jeering, stood many men, with no discernible colours to show whose army they belonged to; in fact, when Torrhen swore next to her, Hermione realized that she *knew* these men.
Her eyes were drawn to the familiar lean and hungry looking man who was on a raised platform, able to look down into the pit without anything obstructing his view. He lounged on his makeshift throne, leaning forward over his knee and a hand hanging in a relaxed manner while the other held a dented goblet, sloshing with some liquid. He tipped his head back, laughing uproariously as the bear lunged forward and Brienne dodged, bringing his goblet to his mouth, and letting the liquid dribble down his long goatee.

"The Brave Companions," she whispered.

Dacey, on her other side, scoffed. "Nothing brave about this lot."


"Where's the Kingslayer?" muttered Dacey, eyes trying to spot the gleaming man in gold. Hermione, realizing that he was missing, began to scan the faces of the men in the crowd.

The crowd began laughing, taking up their song again. Horrified, Hermione watched as Brienne swiped at the bear with her wooden sword, roaring in its face as it went up on its hind legs.

"A bear there was, a bear, a bear! / all black and brown, and covered with hair. / The bear! The bear! / Oh come they said, oh come to the fair! / The fair? Said he, but I'm a bear! All black and brown, and covered with hair!" the man sang, many off-key and out of tune with the others.

On his throne, Hoat heaved a great sigh, loudly calling, "Well, thith ith one thameful fucking performthance. Thop running and fight!"

"We need to do something!" begged Hermione.

"What do you propose?" asked Dacey, her voice tinged with annoyance. "Lady Hermione, there are at least twenty of them, and three of us!"

"We've faced worse," said Torrhen absently. He leaned forward and a tiny bit of loose stone from the top of the wall they were peering over scattered and fell down the side.

"Careful!" hissed Dacey.

"Look, we need to save Brienne," argued Hermione, mindful to keep her voice low even though the men singing wouldn't be likely to hear her anyway. "And if she's here, then so is Jaime Lannister. So, let's figure this out first."

"Like how to save Tarth?" sighed Dacey. "Fine. Can you… magic yourself down there?"

"Yes, of course-" Hermione cut herself off as a dirty man purposefully strode towards the crowd. She barely recognized him without the gleaming golden armour, as he was dressed in a dull brown leather jacket and riding trousers, both smeared with dirt and blood. His once shining blond hair was darkened with grime to a light brown, and there was a beard on his face.

He pushed his way through to the edge of the pit, and stared down. Hermione only saw the side of his face, but it was enough to realize he was angry. He turned back to Hoat, glaring up at him. "A wooden sword?"

Hoat stared down at him. "Thought you'd gone."

"So did I," muttered Dacey. Hermione nudged her shoulder into the other woman in reprimand.
The Kingslayer repeated himself, incredulously. "You gave her a wooden sword!"

Hoat shrugged. "I'the only got one bear."

Jaime spun back around, as Brienne's sword was snatched from her by a giant paw. She hollered and backpedalled, but the bear advanced with a roar.

"I'm going down," said Torrhen suddenly. "If Dacey and I start on the far end across from Hoat, can you Apparate into the pit, Lady Hermione?"

"Yes," she said, firmly.

"We'll need to make a mad dash out, though," said Dacey. She sighed. "Well, I suppose it's up to you then to save Brienne of Tarth and capture the Kingslayer, again."

"Not a problem," said Hermione, feeling vicious.

"I'll pay her bloody ransom. Or - my father will pay! A Lannister always pays their debts! Gold, sapphires, whatever you want!" the Kingslayer was shouting at Hoat, desperation tingeing his voice. "Just get her out of there!"

Hoat sneered down at the man, and Hermione felt Dacey and Torrhen make their way back down the stairs. She remained perched at the top of the crumbling wall, eyes glued to the scene in front of her. She could accio Brienne, but it was draw attention too quickly - what else could she do? Frowning, Hermione muttered a tripping hex on the bear and watched as it landed heavily on its feet, giving Brienne time to move to another part of the pit, among the jeers of those watching.

"Thou get in any trouble, all thou got to tho ith thay 'My father' and that's it," said Hoat, and Hermione was painfully reminded of Draco Malfoy, although her classmate had a much more pronounced panicked look on his face than Jaime Lannister did. "All thou Lords and Ladies. Thou thtill think that the only thing that matters ith gold. All your troubles are gone."

He waved his arm and two of his Brave Companions moved forward, seizing Jaime Lannister. The man shouted and threw one off, but another took the man's place. There was a grapple, with the blond Lannister throwing a punch and even kicking one man in the stomach, but eventually three more Brave Companions came forward.

One punched the Lannister hard in the stomach and he doubled over; another backhanded him and his head flew to the side. He moaned something, but turned his head back to face Hoat, who was staring at him.

"Have thou got thomething to thay?" the lean man asked, cruelty lining his face.

Come on, Torrhen, Dacey. Where are you? thought Hermione nervously, glancing back at the pit. The bear got back to its feet and roared at Brienne, and it lunged forward. A terrified scream cut through the air as a giant paw knocked into her side and sent her sprawling. At the same time, one of the Companions kicked Jaime in the back of the knee and he fell heavily to the ground, grimacing in pain.

"Thou don't want to thay the wrong thing. Thou're nothing without your daddy, and your daddy ithn't here. Never forget that!" Hoat stood from his stone, makeshift throne and loomed over him. He brought out his sword, slowly releasing it from his scabbard at his side, all the while walking down the steps that made his throne rise above the crowd.

Horror crept up Hermione's spine. Oh, no. Oh, no. Please - no -
One of the Companions forced Jaime Lannister to the ground, and drew his right hand over an uneven block of stone left behind from her bombardment.

"Here, this thould help you remember!" snarled Hoat, and with a sure swing, he brought down his sword. The swing was fast and sure; the blade cut through Jaime Lannister's flesh and bone. The Brave Companions holding him down leapt back once the sword finished its arc.

Blood immediately began pooling onto the stone, but it took Jaime Lannister a moment to process what happened. He stared at what was his right hand, tiny burst of blood spitting up and around the sleeve of his shirt. Then - his mouth opened and he yelled.

Over his shouts, Hoat laughed. "Thith makes me happier than all thour gold ever could. And that-" he finished off by punctuating in Brienne's direction, in the pit "-makes me happier than all her thapphires. tho go buy thourthelf a golden hand and fuck thourthelf with it!"

Hermione could wait no longer; she stood, cancelled the disillusionment charm on herself, and shouted, her wand pointed at the bar, "Diffindo!"

The red light soared over the suddenly confused and shocked Brave Companions, and slashed a jagged red line across the bear's flank, which spurted blood. The bear roared and twisted to see its new enemy.

Hoat's face went red and he turned on his heel to face the pit. "WHAT THE FUCK ITH GOING ON WITH MY BEAR?"

Hermione Apparated, landing directly in front of Brienne and shot off another cutting curse, this time catching the bear across the other side. It howled as blood poured down its fur, matting it. It began to hobble, listing to the side as it called out in pain. Hermione leapt back, hoping to avoid being covered; she was running out of blood-free clothes at this point.

"IT'TH THE WITH!" Hoat shouted, mispronouncing "witch" entirely. "KILL HER! KILL HER!"

Hermione swore under her breath and turned to face Brienne, who was on the ground behind her. Her face was pale and there were bruises under her eyes, and one cheek was already swelling. The blood from the cut on her neck was beginning to clot.

"Can you stand?" gasped Hermione, glancing up and casting a protego as a few Companions grabbed bows and began raining arrows on them. The metal-tipped projectiles bounced off her shield, but she grimaced as she felt each one hit.

Brienne gaped. "Yes. Yes, My Lady."

"Good, do so," commanded Hermione, glancing up towards the men leered over them. There was a shout and then cries - Torrhen and Dacey had joined, and the crowd was split into two; those fighting two angry Northern Kingsguards and those who wanted to follow Hoat's orders and kill her.

"Get behind me," said Hermione as Brienne stood and shakily made her way behind the smaller woman.

"Now what?" the taller woman gasped.

"Hold onto me." Brienne reached forward and did so gingerly. Once Hermione was sure she had a grasp, she dropped the spell on her shield and spun on her heel, Apparated them out of the pit.

They reappeared near Hoat's throne, even though the man had moved towards the pit when she
revealed herself. Brienne turned green and fell to her knees, coughing up spittle.

The men nearest turned at the sound of her crack, their sword raised. Hermione snapped up her wand and shouted, panicked, "Stupefy!"

The men dropped to the ground and those around her paused, staring at him and then her. Some had seen what she could do during their retaking of Harrenhal, but most were unsure of her abilities.

Spurred on by her own anger, and horror at what she witnessed, Hermione slashed her wand, vanishing the swords right out the hands of the men nearest her. A few cried out in shock, but she wasn't done. She nonverbally cast ventus, flicking her wand in the whip-like motion the wind jinx called for. A strong gush a cold air blasted from her wand and sent those nearest her flying back, knocking into one another like dominoes. The furthest from the spell, those standing by the pit, fell in, screaming.

A roar from the bear told Hermione that it was attacking its newest friends in the pit, and she grinned. A large circle had appeared around Hermione now, with a significant portion of the Companions cut down by either Dacey or Torrhen, or by Hermione's spell.

Jaime Lannister was revealed, pale-faced, sweating, and clutching his stump with his good, left hand. Brienne, who was shakily making it to her feet, cried out at the sight of him and stumbled forward.

Hermione began making her way towards him, protecting Brienne, by banishing sharp stone remnants towards some Companions, watching as the stone cut their faces or knocked them to the ground, unconscious, if they were large enough. She transfigured a few larger pieces that made up the crumbled wall of the kitchens into the wolves she had used before at Harrenhal, and the men who recognized the spell broke formation and ran further into the ruins.

Hoat was screaming above them all, shouting to kill her, to stop her, but men were either being cut down by Torrhen and Dacey, or running away.

Eventually, the two made it to her side. Both were bloodied but in good spirits, despite Dacey having a long thin cut on her arm.

"Time to go!" she shouted.

"Grab onto me!" replied Hermione, leaning down to help Brienne haul Jaime to his feet. The man's pale face turned off-white and Hermione was afraid he was going to throw up. She felt Torrhen grab her around the middle and Dacey clutch at her sleeve. Using their Portkey - Torrhen's pouch - Hermione shouted, "Hufflepuff!"

They ripped through the air and travelled the distance of hundreds of miles in an instant, and crumpled together in a giant mess on the floor of the very room Jaime Lannister had been imprisoned in, while at Riverrun. The man himself was crying, tears running down his face, as he landed hard on his bloodied stump when they arrived.

Brienne was sick, curled on her side and clutching her ribs Torrhen and Dacey, on the other hand, had rolled to their feet. Shouts and the sound of running boots caught Hermione's attention and she crawled forward until she was abreast to the Kingslayer.

She had her wand out and began casting healing spells on the man's stump. She wasn't sure what to use - what could heal a severed limb? - but began with Snape's counter spell to Secrumpseptra, the musical Latin spilling from her mouth as she traced her wand tip around the stump, "Vulnera Sanentur!"
The still-gushing wound began to clot, slowly, so he said it again, poking this time. "Vulnera Sanentur!"

Then, a hand grabbed her by the shoulder and yanked her back. She gasped, spinning to face Robb. "Hermione! What are you doing?"

"I'm healing his wound!" she snapped back, shrugging his hand off.

"But why?" pressed Dacey with a scowl. The dark-haired woman was standing book-ended with Torrhen, Brienne between them. Both had their hands clasped on the woman's arms, holding her in place as she struggled and stared hard at the man on the floor, blood still pooling around his stump and staining the ground.

"Why not?" snapped back Hermione. "We're all human here, aren't we? Why is his life worth any less of ours?" She turned to face Robb, who was staring down at her. "We've had this conversation before, remember? About being a good man, and doing the right thing? The easy thing would be letting Jaime Lannister die, Robb. Maybe then you'll get your vengeance, but you won't get your answers."

Robb swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing, but he then nodded, once, quickly. "Help him."

Hermione turned back to the man, moaning on the floor. The blood began to clot, and seal over, so she used tergeo to siphon off the blood and flicked it towards the fireplace. The blood hit the fire, making it spit and sizzle.

"Help me hold him down," ordered Hermione, and Robb, slowly, but then with speed, knelt beside Hermione and pushed Jaime Lannister onto his back, and then pressed down on his shoulders.

"Your Grace..." someone breathily cautioned from the room, but Hermione didn't look up.

Able to see the wound more clearly, now that the Kingslayer wasn't curled up around it, Hermione swallowed her bile at the sight of bone and ragged muscle and tendons.

"Reparo," she cast, knowing the mending charm wasn't necessarily for healing, but she needed the worst of the wound to be healed. She cast again, and once more, until she felt that it jump-started the natural healing process. She then pointed her wand in the air and summoned Essence of Dittany and her beaded bag in one go, nonverbally.

A few moments later, someone shrieked out in the hall. Her bag flew through the open door, and Hermione directed it to the ground beside her. Her free hand caught the bottle of potion, and she began to drip it onto the wound, where it sizzled and hissed, smoke wafting up from it. Jaime shouted, and Robb grit his teeth holding the man down as he began to spasm and fight against him.

Suddenly, Eddard Karstark was there next to his King, helping. The combined weight of the men worked, and then Jaime Lannister slipped into unconsciousness.

"Is it supposed to do that?" asked Robb, watching her carefully.

She nodded, leaning back on her heels and taking in a few deep breaths. "That's it. I've done what I can. You'll want Maester Vyman to look him over."

"Of course," agreed Robb, letting go of the Kingslayer's shoulders and sitting back. Eddard hefted the man into his arms and dragged him to the bed, depositing him on it none-too-gently.

Robb stood, and extended a hand to Hermione, almost absently as he stared at the man who his
mother had freed. Hermione took his hand and he pulled her to her feet, causing his attention to shift.

"I take it none of you caused his wound?" he asked, still holding onto her hand as he glanced over at Torrhen, Dacey, and Brienne, finishing on her with narrowed eyes.

"No, Your Grace," replied Dacey, straightening her back. "We encountered Vargo Hoat at what remains of Harrenhal. He was with his Brave Companions and he cut the King Slayer's hand off."

"Serves the bastard right," rumbled the Greatjon, stepping further into the room and glaring murderously at the unconscious man. "Couldn't have happened to a better man."

Robb frowned, but didn't say anything. Hermione, however, scowled. "He just lost an essential limb, Lord Umber. In an incredibly violent and humiliating manner."

"And he's helped kill friends and men of mine, my Lady," countered the large man. "Don't think I'll forget that. What good has he done for us? For me? To outweigh any past ill deeds?"

"He tried to save Brienne's life!" argued Hermione, gesturing towards the woman with the hand not in Robb's.

Umber raised his eyebrows. "Tried, being the key word there."

Hermione stomped a foot and went to cross her arms, only to realize that Robb still had one. She glanced at it, and then him and he hurriedly dropped her hand and stepped to the side, clearing his throat as he did so.

"We'll discuss this later," he said, looking at everyone pointedly. "After we've had some sleep. After all, it's late." He turned back to Hermione. "Can you ward the room?"

"I'll do it so I'm the only one who can get in here," she agreed, nodding.

"Good," replied Robb. "Later though; I can have several men stand guard until you've rested."

"We can't meet to discuss this in the morning," countered Umber, glancing from the King Slayer to Robb. "Nor will Lady Hermione have time to ward the room and rest."

Hermione frowned. "Why not?"

"It's His Grace's Nameday celebrations," explained Umber. "Surely you remember, Lady Hermione?"

Hermione's mouth dropped open, and she mentally counted back from when she was discussing it last with Torrhen. Merlin! She thought. That snuck up on me quickly.

With a frown, she looked at Robb, then the Greatjon, Jaime Lannister's still form, and then back at Robb.

"Well," she began, running a hand through her messy hair. She suddenly wanted to take a bath in her tent with her shampoo and body wash and not the soap the maids had provided her with. She was so very tired, all of a sudden - not physically tired, but mentally tired. "I'm going to bed, then. I'll find time soon to ward the room to relieve the guards. And to check on his wound."

She turned and began walking away.

"Wait - Lady Hermione -"
Hermione stopped and looked at Robb, waiting for him to speak. When nothing was said, she nodded and sighed. "Goodnight Robb. And…" she paused, glancing pointedly at Jaime Lannister. "Happy birthday. I hope it's what you want."

She nodded once more at the Greatjon, and walked away.

TBC...
Chapter Notes

Also, as I have not yet mentioned, I do have a fancast for this (although feel free to substitute your own):
Hermione Granger - Crystal Reed / Tessa Thompson
Lucas Blackwood - Daniel Sharman
Dacey Mormont - Katie McGrath
Daryn Hornwood - Santiago Cabrera

The Winter Witch XVI

The next morning, Hermione was well rested but still rather irritated. Her hair seemed to reflect this, bushing out a bit more than normal, fighting against her hands as she stared at her reflection in a mirror that hung above her drawers in her bedroom in the tent.

She yanked the strands back and combed them into a collection in one hand as she tried to loop a hair tie around the thick curls to make a sloppy bun.

“Oh, honey, that's just not going to work,” the mirror, in dulcet sympathetic tones, cooed at her. Hermione scowled.

She gave an aggravated grunt when she pulled too hard at one point, finally giving up and letting her hair wall in natural, tangled curls around and down her shoulders.

“It's going to be one of those days,” she muttered instead.

“Is it?” the mirror asked, clucking.

Hermione's scowl deepened. *I really hate talking mirrors. Why do wizards like them again? Although…* she looked contemplatively at the bland mirror hanging there on the wall. Not all wizarding mirrors were bad… particularly that very interesting set that James Potter and Sirius Black shared, the one half that Sirius gave Harry in their fifth year…

*Maybe I can give Robb a bit more of his family back, before we figure out ways to get Sansa, Bran, and Rickon physically here,* she thought, an idea taking root.

Her mood slightly buoyed, Hermione began rummaging through her drawers, pulling open the top drawer first and searching through whatever clothing she had left in it over the year they were on the run, shoving aside jumpers and t-shirts. When that drawer remained elusive, she went to the next, and the next. After tearing through those, she went into the boy's room, and searched their drawers.

“Aha!” She found what she was looking for in a small shaving mirror Ron had left behind, tucked neatly in with his socks. The mirror’s surface was a bit dirty, spotted with bits of dried shaving foam from his wand, but perfectly serviceable.

Hermione gathered the shaving mirror and tucked it securely in her beaded bag. She needed at least one more for her plan to work; and there was a cute little pocket makeup mirror that Ginny had given
her around the time of the Yule Ball…

But the plans had to wait; she needed to ward the space around Jaime Lannister’s room.

The walk from her bedchambers in Riverrun -- near the family wing, so to speak -- across halls and wings, and down and then back up several staircases, ended when she was on the opposite side of the castle, facing towards the Riverlands and not the mountain view she had from her room.

There was a single guard posted outside the Lannister’s bedroom, which she thought strange. She recognized the young man though, as one of Robb’s Kingsguard, and one of Blackwood’s sons, Lucas.

Hermione eyed him as she slowed her approach, from striding to a gentle walk as she neared the door. Lucas was on the younger side; where Eddard and Torrhen Karstark were both in their early thirties, and Dacey Mormont and Daryn Hornwood in their late twenties, Lucas and Robb were closer in age and their youthful appearance emphasized that. Lucas was tall and skinny, with wiry muscle. He had a head full of curly dark brown hair and a square face with dark, round eyes set under a heavy brow.

His complexion was darker than some Northmen, a golden hue closer to that of Jaime Lannister and those who lived near the coasts. Unlike most Northmen, Lucas preferred a mild facial trim, with scruff on his cheek and under his chin, with some sideburns and the soft bristles of a moustache on his upper lip that oddly suited him well. Hermione had seen him trim anything longer to a more manageable length that would never become “bushy.”

“Lady Hermione,” he greeted, in a soft voice.

Hermione nodded back. “Lucas.” She glanced at the door. “Just you, today?”

He shook his head. “Daryn will be back soon, but the Kingslayer hasn’t woken.”

“Has Maester Vyman been by?” asked Hermione, drawing her wand. She began tracing runes of containment and repellent on the doorframe, Lucas watching her with his dark eyes.

“Earlier this morning,” confirmed Lucas.

“What did the man say about Jaime’s injury?” asked Hermione curiously. She’s pluck a strand of the man’s hair when she was in the room to ward the room on him directly.

Lucas shrugged, a very laconic move for the rather solemn man. “He’ll live.”

*Obviously*, thought Hermione darkly. It wasn’t like they exactly cared about the wellbeing of their prisoner. There was no Geneva Convention here to dictate terms of POWs. She sighed and entered the room, Lucas watching all the while.

Jaime Lannister remained on top of the covers of the bed he had been deposited on the previous night, in the same position. He was still unconscious, but his brows were furrowed and there were tense lines around his mouth and eyes that showed his pain and discomfort.

It prickled at Hermione, but -- *first things first*, she thought, and she reached out and yanked a single strand of golden hair from his head. The man made no move as she did so. With a few other whispered words of Latin, the strand dissolved into the same golden confetti that she used to scry his location, and the golden specks quickly spread and soon covered the entire interior of the room from floor to ceiling. The golden dust shimmered for a moment and then seeped into the stonewalls of the room, into the rough stone floors, and wooden beams of the ceiling.
The room was warded, and Jaime Lannister could not leave without Hermione’s dismantling the spell. She’d build a failsafe in for Robb alone later, a password protected “key” for him to come and go as well.

Hermione paused by Jaime’s bed, peering down at the older man. This was the man that Robb said had pushed his younger brother from a tower, resulting in him being crippled; this was the same man that practiced incest with his own sister that resulted in three children -- both were terrible crimes. By all rights, the man had admitted to them and was even proud of what he had done and would continue to do if free. So why was Hermione defending him?

*I suppose it goes back to S.P.E.W., of a sort,* she thought with a moue of distaste. While she certainly didn’t consider Jaime Lannister a house-elf (and didn’t she wish, just for a betrayed moment that they existed in Westeros so they could handle the day-to-day of dealing with Jaime Lannister in his warded cell!), she likened him more to a Death Eater of Lucius Malfoy or Severus Snape’s calibre. Both men, particularly Malfoy, had committed several crimes while she was a student at Hogwarts, not limited to trying to kill Ginny (although it was likely he had no idea what the diary actually was), kill Harry, set a basilisk on the students of Hogwarts which included his own son, and then participated in two major battles: the one in the Department of Mysteries and later at Hogwarts.

And yet -- this was a man who attempted to almost beg with Harry to hand over the prophecy. He even had said they would go free! Did she necessarily believe that? Had he been alone with maybe one or two of the other Death Eaters -- ones who had not been in Azkaban -- perhaps. But with Bellatrix, both Rodolphus and Rabastan and then Dolohov with him, there was no way they’d let the six of them leave.

When the battle resumed after Harry’s second resurrection, the man spent more time finding his son and then disappearing than participating, as that was all Lucius and Narcissa had wanted to do upon their arrival at Hogwarts: find Draco and leave. Could Hermione blame them? What would Molly or Arthur have done if they were losing and they had the opportunity to safe one or two of their children? They would’ve sent Ginny to safety, being their youngest and only daughter, despite her protests; could Hermione expect any less of the Malfoys?

In all honesty, she saw both side and while she didn’t like them, she would’ve been able to work side-by-side. Maybe that was why she could see beyond the obvious with the Kingslayer as well -- she was as alien to him as he was to her; and as an outsider, she didn’t have the same notions of the man as others did. Maybe it would change, and maybe it would not. Now, though, she would defer to Robb’s knowledge of the situation.

Jaime Lannister would remain a prisoner in Riverrun for quite a long time.

There was no wrapping paper in Westeros, Hermione discovered, after hunting down a few of the Riverrun servants she knew on a first-name basis (never ignore the staff, she knew their value better than most, as they were the backbone of any household). Instead, she found a clean tissue in her tent and transfigured it into some sparkling silver wrapping paper with prowling wolves in dark grey -- it was like they were hunting their prey across a winter landscape.

*Suitable, and something I think Robb will like,* she thought happily, using a sticking charm to seal the edges of the paper together over the mirror. Then, she went in search of Robb.

There were many people in the hallways of Riverrun; despite being a fairly large castle-cum-fortress, the many passages and hallways that branched to different wings and halls, each and every one was filled with people either brushing and sweeping the floor, lighting candles from hanging chandeliers, or scrubbing. Riverrun had to be gleaming for Robb’s twentieth Nameday -- which was only two
days away.

Hours-long feasts were planned, so the kitchen was a no-go zone; even the Great Hall, where most of the Lords gathered to share Intel and wind down after political discussions, was considered “off limits” as -- in a token of good faith -- Catelyn was allowed to organize the celebration under supervision. It kept her busy, and with Arya miserably trailing behind her, kept the Tully woman focused.

(Hermione still thought that was something psychologically wrong, and that Catelyn needed an impartial friend to sit down and discuss things with, but since therapists and therapy didn’t exist in Westeros, it was a problem Hermione shelved for another date. She was also acutely aware that she was sliding into her “fixer” tendencies -- at Hogwarts, Harry had a “saving people thing,” and she had a thing for sticking her nose in other people’s business when it wasn’t always warranted. That meant that she thought there was a problem and she wanted to fix them.)

However, since very few meetings were actually called that required Hermione’s presence, she figured the best place to find Robb was in one of three options: the lists, practicing with his squire, Olyvar, or his men; the tiny and very ‘Southern’ Godswood; or his office, going over paperwork and correspondence.

Taking a circuitous route, Hermione quickly eliminated the last two options and found herself on the same balcony catwalk overlooking the inner courtyard that was used for training with the training ring she and Dacey had decimated Hornwood and the Karstarks.

Robb himself was being circled by his guard, as well as the Greatjon and Lord Glover. The two older men were dressed in full chainmail and leathers, but the younger soldiers had shucked much of their heavy armour despite the chilled weather. Their breaths misted in front of their faces, but sweat glistened off their bodies and their faces were flushed red.

And while the men -- and even Dacey -- had impressively toned and muscular bodies, Hermione was utterly transfixed by only one. Whenever she was with him, Robb was covered from neck to wrist and toe, in layered shirts and vests and trousers tucked into calf-high boots and even sometimes wrapped in a fur-lined cloak of some sort in Stark colours.

But now -- in the training ring -- he wore a sleeveless splint mail, cloth-lined black leather vest with various buckles and straps along both his sides, presumably for tightening the vest to fit him. There was a split skirt underneath the armour, like a reverse tuxedo tail for his front, most likely from the cloth undershirt he wore. His trousers were tucked into matching black knee-high boots. Long archer’s gloves in black buckled and strapped up his arm into forearm braces.

The palm of his hands were bare, leaving him able to keep a grip on his sword as he shifted his weight and swung it in an arc towards Daryn Hornwood and Torrhen. Hermione’s eyes traced his arm muscles as they flexed and shifted.

Sparks flew off the ringing steel as the blades caught in a three-way layer, and then Daryn twisted his wrist and disengaged his blade with theirs, stepping back, just as Torrhen aggressively moved forward, his blade locked with Robb’s. Hermione watched as Robb planted his feet in the ground and pushed back against Torrhen -- who was taller than him, but Robb was stockier -- and shove.

Robb swung down with his blade, but Torrhen parried, and then parried again as the swords swung back and forth, clashes that were rhythmic in the *clang clang clang* of each hit. Each hit increased Hermione’s anxiety and she quickly found her hands up at her cheeks, her nails digging in, quite like the TriWizard tournament when Harry went up against the dragon.
The Young Wolf spun away from Torrhen and then Lucas and Eddard were there, both attacking him at once, causing the young Wolf to raise his blade with both hands and block their downswing with his sword parallel to the ground. He quickly stepped back but then Torrhen and Daryn were there, with Dacey prowling around the edges, looking for a way in with her two gladius swords.

Robb kicked Daryn, sending him stumbling back, bringing his sword up to clash with Torrhen’s; behind, Eddard let out a cry and charged, bringing his sword down in a stroke that would slice at Robb’s back. But the young man broke from Torrhen’s blade, slashing sideways and making Hermione’s friend and guard weave away from the glinting metal; Robb continued the momentum and spun around to face Eddard, blocking the downward swing. He then rammed forward and pushed Eddard back, knocking him into Lucas, who fell to the floor.

Dacey let out a scream and moved with both blades forward. Robb, instead, wove backwards, each step making him move around the ring as Dacey slashed with both. Robb looked like a dancing snake, a cobra listening to some unheard snake charmer’s music as he ducked, bobbed, slid, and twisted around Dacey’s attack, only using his sword to knock away her blade when they got too close.

Eddard and Torrhen teamed up, their usual set, but it was soon predictable and Robb was easily keeping up to both men and their familiar attacks. Instead, he allowed them to nearly box him in at one corner of the ring -- and then he utilized Hermione’s own tactic against them: he climbed onto the partial barrier that surrounded that ring and used the height to bear down on both men.

With the high ground, he kicked at Torrhen, snapping the man’s head back with a blow to his chin. Torrhen crumpled to the ground like a puppet cut from his strings. Eddard, enraged, turned to renew the fight, but Robb had him pinned, his sword tip at the man’s throat.

“Yield,” he said, quietly.

Eddard dropped his sword, panting heavily with a glare in his eyes, but stepped away.

However, Robb had forgotten about Lord Glover and the Greatjon; Glover snuck up and swept Robb’s legs from the wall. Hermione winced at the loud crack his back made sliding down, and then the Greatjon was there, no sword in hand but a single punch sent Robb to the ground, a dazed look on his face.

The crowd around them moaned.

The Greatjon let out a booming laugh, and helped the woozy king to his feet. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief that Robb was still walking -- unsteadily -- and brought her hands down to rest on the balustrade.

“Ah, Your Grace,” laughed the Greatjon, “You were so focused on the enemy ahead, you didn’t see us at the side!”

“Something --” Robb trailed off, shaking his head. “Ah -- something I’ll strive to remember in the future, Umber.”

Glover gave Robb a thin-lipped smile of approval. “Not all enemies will come at you from in front, Your Grace.”

Robb nodded.

“Now, why don’t you go clean up, eh?” suggested the Greatjon, motioning for Olyvar Frey to race forward with a towel and goblet filled with something, handing them both to Robb. “You’ve got an
audience.”

“An audience?” repeated Robb.

The Greatjon turned his head and looked pointedly at Hermione, high above them watching. Her face turned bright red at being called out for watching. Both Robb and Glover turned to face her as well; but while Glover’s tiny smile slipped off his face into neutrality, Robb’s face split into a beaming smile.

“My Lords,” the young King said, pushing past the gangly squire, shoving the towel and drink back at him as he loped across the grounds and over the barrier of the ring, and then up a set of side stairs to Hermione’s balcony overlooking the courtyard.

“How long were you watching?” he asked breathlessly, coming to a stop a few feet from her.

“Long enough,” replied Hermione, wrestling with her heated cheeks. To draw attention away from her embarrassment, she reached into her beaded bag and thrust the wrapped present towards him, despite it being a few days early.

“What’s this?” he asked, gingerly taking it, running his fingers over the shiny and strange fabric wrapping, eyes wide.

“Your birthday present.” Hermione closed her eyes.

Cultural differences, Hermione!

“Sorry, your Nameday present.”

Blue eyes lit up in childish wonder, Robb grinned up at Hermione from under his brow and the look sent a zing of something straight down her spine. He undid the wrapping carefully, and then his brows came together in confusion. “A mirror?”

“When it shakes, say my name. My full name, okay?” Hermione smirked at the look. She pulled another -- the Yule mirror from Ginny -- and began walking away. “Just stay there.”

She Apparated down into the courtyard, and held the mirror at eye level, certain that Robb was watching her from the balcony, although he couldn’t hear her. Holding his gaze, she whispered to the mirror, “Robb Stark.”

On the balcony, Robb jumped and fumbled with the mirror that -- although she couldn't hear or see it-- would begin vibrating in his hands. There were a few moments until he regained his hold, and then his lips moved --

“Hermione?” shock covered his voice, and Hermione moved her eyes from the physical man standing above her to the face in the mirror.

“Hello, Robb,” she said, beginning to move and holding the mirror at eye level so he could see not only her face, but the surroundings. “Do you like your gift?”

“But--! This is a mirror!” he sputtered. “How are we talking like this? Is it like your parchment? It is, isn’t it?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes -- very similar. We just have to say each other’s name and then the mirror will let you know there is a call coming in. To end the call, you just say the person’s name, and finite.”

“This is much more secure than the parchments,” said Robb aloud, already thinking of ways to use the mirrors.
Hermione turned on her heel and Apparated back next to him, and to her surprise and pleasure, he didn’t jump at the sharp crack. “Very secure. You can use them anywhere, at any time. It’ll be an immediate response unless the other person doesn’t have their mirror.” She then pointedly looked at hers, and said, “Robb Stark, *finite*.”

“Do we just have one set, then?” asked Robb, examining the shaving mirror as it went foggy and dark for a moment, until the smoke cleared up and all he saw was his reflection in the polished surface, and not Hermione’s face.

“For now,” she admitted. “But I’m going to make one for Arya and then for Sansa. Getting it to her might be difficult. We need to find someone who can pass off as a servant to slip into the Red Keep and leave it for her. Then, it’ll be easier to plan a way for her to escape and get out -- even better, once I see her room, I can visualize it and Apparate to her, and Portkey back to Riverrun.”

Robb was speechless. There was a strange look on his face: equally parts surprise, happiness, and something else that reminded her of Fleur’s face when she declared herself to be beautiful enough for both her *and* Bill after being scarred by Greyback.

“Hermione,” he breathed, a different breathless quality to his voice compared to earlier. He stretched his hand forward and cupped her elbow, drawing her close to him, but not quite enough. There was still a sliver of space between their bodies. “I can’t even -- there is no way I can repay you for this.”

“There’s nothing to repay,” she said quietly, sensing the intimacy of the moment.

“You have bled for me, fought in my army and won the trust of my men,” the young king began, his voice low and his eyes dark, a blue-grey that reminded her of a summer’s storm over the sea. “You returned Arya to me, and now a way for Sansa to come home. You found the Kingslayer and restored peace among my men for my mother’s mistake.”

He shook his head. “What *can’t* you do?”

Flustered, Hermione blurted out, “Fly. I’m terrified of heights.”

There was a momentary silence, and then Robb was leaning back, laughing loudly. His entire body shook and Hermione’s twisted into a wry smile.

“Ha, ha,” she deadpanned.

Robb’s laughs died off into chuckles. “The witch who can do it all, is afraid of heights?” He shook his head. “You’d best not go to the Wall, then.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

There was a wide grin on Robb’s face, his cheeks flushed from his laughter. “Come, Lady Hermione -- I want to show you something.”

He slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, and it was the most natural thing in the world. They ignored any looks sent their way -- knowing looks from the Northern men; cautious looks from the Riverlands Lords; and hostile looks from the Freys in general -- as Robb led her towards the blacksmith.

“Remember that plan about the pins? The designs for all members of their houses under their family sigils?” began Robb.

Hermione nodded.
“I had Gendry begin work on them,” revealed Robb quietly, tilting his head close to Hermione’s as they walked. “Arya recommended him -- and, honestly, I indulge my little sister. But Gendry helped keep her safe when they left King’s Landing, so I owe him somewhat. He’s earned my trust.”

The blacksmith was incredibly warm, with the heat radiating from the building several feet away; Hermione could feel it as they walked up to the low stone building, separate from everything else in case of fire. Inside, there were several men in various states of dress -- some just wore leather aprons over their chests, while a few others wore tunics that stuck to their bodies with sweat.

Gendry, whom Hermione had met before, was working diligently on something, banging away with a hammer before switching to a chisel for more delicate work. On a workbench next to him, were finished and polished silver cloak pins. There was a variety of designs, and as they moved closer, Hermione spotted the familiar wolf’s head for Stark, the curved fish for Tully, and others.

There has to be at least one for each family that is here, she thought in surprise, glancing at Robb.

He caught her eyes and nudged his chin towards the buckets underneath the workbench, some halfway full with the pins. Hermione’s eyes grew wide. I knew Gendry was good -- Arya said so and wouldn’t exaggerate something like that -- but in Ron’s words: bloody hell!

“Gendry,” called Robb loudly.

The young man, only a few years younger than Hermione and Robb, startled and his chisel slipped. It didn’t damage the metal he was working with, but it was enough for the man to turn, a grumble on his lips that died quickly when he saw who stood near.

He swept into a low bow, eyes down as he mumbled, “Your Grace.”

“Genry. We’re going to borrow one of these, okay?” said Robb, picking the direwolf head from the workbench and then spiriting her out of the smithy as quickly as they arrived.

“What’s going on?” asked Hermione, as Robb tugged her forward, back into Riverrun.

“I want to show you something,” he said, eyes forward.

“You already said that. And you already did!” protested Hermione. “What’s next?”

‘Next’ was in the family wing of Riverrun, specifically, his mother’s childhood bedroom. The soft, muted colours of blue in varying shades spoke of a softer, different Catelyn who was supposed to marry Brandon Stark and not Eddard. There was a gauzy canopy around her bed, with pale silk pillows and a thin bed sheet and duvet compared to the thick covers Robb -- as well as Torrhen -- had told her about in the North.

There were comfortable chairs and benches lined with padding, half-finished and unfinished needlepoint and embroidery projects littered on side tables and on the walls. The room was light and airy, and it’s subtle femininity made Hermione wonder if the North hardened Catelyn, or if she hardened herself.

“Because this isn’t completely awkward, Robb,” began Hermione, deliberately standing in the middle of the room with her arms crossed over her stomach, trying not to touch anything, “Is there a reason why we’re here?”

Robb nodded, and pointed to a single, small landscape painting. “Remember how you told me you can’t Apparate to a location without seeing it first?”
Hermione slowly nodded.

“I need you to memorize this location,” explained Robb, motioning for Hermione to come closer. Reluctantly, she did so, eyes on the painting. Robb elaborated further on it without her prompting: “Uncle Brandon had it painted for mother, back when they were courting -- before, well… before the war. It was one of his favourite places to go with father, and then father showed Jon and I one day.”

Surrounded by unending forest, a single, partially slanted Rapunzel’s tower stood alone, a swath of grey in a sea of dark green against the backdrop of steely greys and white.

“There’s a tower in the Wolfswood,” said Robb quietly, reverence in his voice. “It’s not far from Winterfell, but it’s enough that you’d take a day or two to get there on horseback. Father showed it to Jon and I when we were old enough, and then, later, we’d go with Jory and the others. The tower doesn’t look like that anymore -- it’s a bit rougher, and it’s missing some roof slats -- but nothing really changes in the Wolfswood.”

“This is in the North?” asked Hermione, just as quietly. The painting was well done, and she could almost hear the rustling of the leaves in the trees, the low whisper of the wind.

Robb nodded.

“Robb -- I -- normally Apparation doesn’t work like that,” she said, thinking back to the three D’s. “We usually need reference points, an image that’s not a painting; like a memory. But…”

“You’ll do it?” asked Robb. “You can take me?”

Hermione rolled her lower lip in and began to nibble. “I think so. I’m going to go myself first. Then I’ll come back. I don’t want to risk a splinch.”

“Now?” asked Robb, incredulous.

“No time like the present!” smiled Hermione, and feeling a bit reckless like Harry, she turned on her heel and instantly Catelyn’s childhood bedroom in Riverrun was bitterly cold.

A harsh, hissing wind bit into Hermione’s thin sweater, and she stood in snow up to her ankles, shivering. Her hair caught and snarled around her; the wind and chill had tears come to her eyes, and Hermione could feel them freeze.

But before her, surrounded by a large clearing, was the tower in Catelyn’s painting, jutting out with one side completely covered with stuck-on wet packing snow from the wind. It leaned a bit more to the side than it did in the painting, and there were holes in the roof, but it was still recognizable.

Keen to escape the chill, Hermione Apparated back to Riverrun.

“Gods above, Hermione!”

Then Robb’s hands were on her shoulders, quickly rubbing up and down her arms as her teeth chattering. “I-I w-wasn’t expecting i-it t-to be t-that c-cold!”

“I’m sorry!” replied Robb, a frown pulling at his mouth. “I forgot -- you wouldn’t realize that it’s the beginning of winter there.”

“Beginning of winter?” stammered Hermione, incredulously as she looked up at him. “That’s almost as much snow as I saw at Hogwarts in the dead of winter! How much worse is it going to get?”
The frown twisted deeper. “We had a long summer. It’ll probably be as long as.”

“A long summer?”

“About a decade or so?” replied Robb thoughtfully.

Hermione’s mouth dropped open. “A DECADE?”

“Is… is that unusual?” he asked.

Hermione did not reply. Clearing his throat, Robb moved back and ran a hand over his short auburn beard. “Let me grab my winter cloak, and we can go.”

He stalked off, and Hermione took the opportunity to fish out a thicker coat from her beaded bag, thankful that she was still living day-to-day with it and that she hadn’t unpacked. The sight of a floating cloak down the halls of Riverrun -- while humorous -- would probably scare people more than floating crockery or bottles. Clothing was always different, for some reason.

When Robb returned, Hermione smartly pointed her wand at him and then herself, nonverbally casting a warming charm. She sighed happily as the persistent chill that comes with winter eased from her bones -- she was as toasty as when she would sink into a warm bath.

Robb felt the same way, given the small smile on his lips. “That’s quite a nifty spell. Can you charm it on things, too?”

Hermione shook her head. “I’d rather not. Shall we?” she extended her hand and he took it in his, his larger palm sliding against hers and then trapping her fingers as he laced them together, tugging on her slightly.

“Ready.”

Robb had never experienced Apparation. He heard about it, in length, from both Torrhen and Dacey, and even Bracken and Blackwood once. He thought the sensation of being pushed through a small opening was an exaggeration by Torrhen, and that Dacey’s grumbling about a sick stomach were just her way of expressing her ire towards Hermione.

But Robb realized that they were not over exaggerating, and as for Apparation, he didn’t care for it. At all.

When they landed, Robb had to lock his knees to keep from sinking into the snow, and he wheezed heavily, breathing in through his nose and relishing in the sharp chill of winter in the North to settle his stomach.

“I’m sorry,” he heard Hermione say from above him. “But I’m told it gets better with time. Torrhen can manage to stay on his feet now, even if he looks a bit green.”

“Hnnn,” replied Robb, struggling. Eventually, he rose to his full height and marvelled at being back at the tower in the Wolfswood, when seconds before, he was in the Riverlands.

He didn’t even feel the cold -- it was nippy, but like a cool summer’s day instead of the biting freeze he was expecting when Hermione came back, lips already tinged blue and her skin icy pale. Her warming charm was a wonder, and it gave him the opportunity to enjoy the sight of his childhood stomping ground.

*And even better, the company,* he thought, sending a quick ‘sorry’ to Jon, wherever his half-brother
(or was he?) was. Standing just a arm’s length from him, Hermione had her head tilted back, eyes locked above her as large, goose-feather like snowflakes tumbled down from puffy grey clouds. The wind was beginning to ease off, so the flakes appeared less of a battery of swirling white to a gentle, steady fall.

Her brown hair was speckled with the white flakes, and a thin layer was already covering her shoulders. Then, Hermione stuck her tongue out, and tried to catch a snowflake.

She let out a laugh of pure, childish glee, and the next thing he knew, she had yanked on his hand and pulled him forward, their legs trudging as they pushed through the snow. Then, she let go and fell back, her body denting the snow pile with a soft whumph.

She began spreading her arms and legs, moving them back and forth.

“What are you doing?” laughed Robb.

“I’m making a snow angel!” she replied, rolling her eyes. “What? Don’t have those in Westeros?”

He shook his head at her antics. Hermione held her arms out when she decided she had suitably created the wings, and wriggled her fingers at him. “Pull me out without disturbing the angel!”

He rolled his eyes, but leaned forward and instead lifted her bodily from the indent she made, crushing her against his chest as he stepped back.

Their noses brushed against one another, tiny clouds of air escaping their mouths, mingling together as Hermione stared into Robb’s eyes. She could feel every line of his body, from her neck to her hips, where she was pressed tightly against him: there was the hard leather of his light armour, the metal buckles and clasps digging into her softer clothes, the firmness of his muscles, the heat that radiated from him, and not just because of the warming charm.

“I--” began Robb, eyes darting down from hers to her mouth.

Abort! a distant part of Hermione’s brain shrieked. He’s engaged to a Frey! You want to go home!

But another, a quiet, insidious part of Hermione whispered: Go on. You know you want to - you’ve been thinking about it.

Instead, logic prevailed and Hermione cleared her throat, tearing her eyes from Robb, smoothing her hands over his shoulders instead. She patted them and said, “You can let me down now. I think my angel survived.”

“Oh. Right.”

Robb let Hermione slide down his body, and she failed to hide the shivered it elicited from her, deciding to keep her eyes firmly averted. She knew she was blushing, and given that she could still feel his body heat, she knew he was still close to her, looking down, watching.

“So,” she began, stepping a bit to the side and then forward, staring up at the tower before she spun around to face him with her hands tightly clenched behind her back, “Why did you want to come here?”

His eyes were fixed on her, the blue a deep, deep sapphire, and for a long moment, he was silent. Then, he said, “I’m thinking we can use this as a staging ground for the army to retake Winterfell. No one would expect us to come this way. We can use a token force as a distraction to stare down Winterfell through Torrhen’s Square, while the majority of the forces come from behind.”
“And you want to make the pins Portkeys,” said Hermione, understanding everything instantly. “That… will be a lot for me to spell, Robb.”

He nodded. “I know. I’m not saying tomorrow, or within a fortnight, or even three moons from now. But… eventually. Six moons, maybe?”

Determination welled up in Hermione. “I’ll do it in four.”

“I don’t want you being magical exhausted, again,” he said quietly, but in the still of the quiet Wolfswood, his words were loud.

“I won’t,” argued Hermione. “Haven’t you noticed? I’ve been doing more lately -- especially nonverbally. Magic is getting easier for me to use.”

“If you say so,” replied Robb dubiously. After a long moment, much of it spent surveying the tower and the forest, he turned back to her. “Ready to go to Riverrun?”

“In a moment,” she said, turning to take in the picture-perfect forest and its majestic silence, as well as the snow-covered trees around them. “This reminds me of last winter.”

“Oh?”

“Harry and I -- well, we were alone. Ron had left us, and we were stuck in the middle of the Forest of Dean, by ourselves, near Christmas,” she began. “There was snow on the ground, and it was cold, and we were running out of food. We were getting desperate for something to happen, a breakthrough to defeat Voldemort, but nothing was coming. The locket -- the Horcrux -- kept making things worse, too.”

She deliberately kept her back to Robb, knowing that he hadn’t heard this story from her before. She kept notoriously quiet about her past with him, but even so, Torrhen, who knew most, did not know this part.

“And then, just when we were at our lowest, we just…’ she shook her head and gave a tiny laugh. “We just started dancing, Harry and I, in the middle of that tent. Starving, terrified, stupidly young us just looking for a moment of peace. With no music, just us shuffling our feet, taking comfort that our best friend was there when the world was going to hell.”

_Harry_. She blinked back tears, discreetly rubbing at her nose. Then Robb’s hand reached for hers, and he tugged her around to face him.

“How?” he asked.

“How what?” she replied.

He held the hand he was holding up. “How did you dance?”

Hermione blinked, but then smiled. “Oh. Like this.” She positioned one hand of his on her waist, and the other, he kept holding.

And then, with no music, in the North just days away from his childhood home while large, fat snowflakes fluttered down around them, they danced in silence and the chill of winter, enjoying the feelings of peace and happiness that rose between them.

Hermione had her head tilted up, looking past his scruffy chin, his smirking lips, his long nose, and then to his sparkling eyes, and saw the contentment she felt reflected back to her.
It was almost like dancing with Harry, except there was something so undeniably different, something that felt right that it scared her just the same. Yet, she didn’t speak, didn’t interrupt their moment; reality would intrude the moment they returned to Riverrun.

And it did, as the day after Robb’s twentieth, his grandfather Hoster Tully breathed his last.

TBC...
I:XVII

Chapter Notes

There are recognizable quotes in this chapter, the majority in Sansa's scene. They come from the following episodes: 2x08 (The Prince of Winterfell), 3x03 (Walk of Punishment), 3x04 (And Now His Watch is Ended), 3x05 (Kissed by Fire), 3x08 (Second Sons).

the Winter Witch

XVII

Hoster Tully’s funeral was very similar, and very different, to Albus Dumbledore’s. There was no phoenix singing a lament for the fallen man, nor did Rufus Scrimgeour show up to make a speech on behalf of the Ministry of Magic, and Hermione wasn’t sitting next to Ron, clutching his hand with the terrifying realization that, any day now, she, Ron, and Harry would begin their plan to disappear and hunt Voldemort’s Horcruxes.

But the man lay covered, a shroud in Tully-blue with an embroidered silver trout sigil obscuring the man’s wasted body from view with his sword weighing the shroud down. He lay on top of a large pyre that had been built upon a floating pontoon of some sort, which would be pushed out onto the Trident for a water-based, Viking-like “burial.”

Hermione stood behind the Tully family on the deck that extended partially into the Trident, Torrhen and Dacey just behind her but acting as her continued guard (much to Dacey’s disgust). Brynden and Catelyn stood just ahead of her and off to one side, while Edmure held a longbow; Robb stood stoically beside his mother while Arya fidgeted, her hands constantly grabbing at the dress she was forced into. Grey Wind, ever loyal to his master, was at Robb’s side.

Around them, Tully soldiers stood as silent and motionless sentinels, several acting as flag bearers. A gentle breeze made the Tully sigil flutter in a meager, chilly wind.

Behind them, along the shore, was a token amount of people ranging from the castellan of Riverrun, to Maester Vyman, and many others whom Hoster Tully interacted with on a daily basis. All were silent as Vyman led a prayer for the Stranger. The religion of the South, the Faith of the Seven, which Hermione learned was based on seven figures who represented aspects of life, was incredibly different to what Torrhen had described the North’s religion to be like -- fewer figures, more prayers, more communal. Hermione, who had grown up Church of England, found the Faith similar and different enough that it still felt familiar, even with the burning pyre on the water.

Once the prayer was done, Brynden and Robb walked off the pier and down a few steps that led into the cold waters of the Trident, to where two Tully soldiers were holding onto the pontoon to keep it from floating away. The Blackfish and Robb then took control of the pontoon from the two soldiers as Hoster’s family. They gently pushed and Hermione watched as the funeral boat slowly floated downstream.
At the same time, Edmure, as Hoster's heir, stepped forward, drawing an arrow from his side quiver. A brazier nearby was lit by a soldier and Edmure waited a few tense minutes until the pontoon was further downstream and then dipped the arrow into the brazier. Once the fire caught on the tip, he nocked the arrow and drew back, glancing at the wind direction. He paused, judging the distance, and drew in a deep breath.

As he exhaled, he released the string to the bow, and the arrow went flying, cutting through the air quickly, and landing on the funeral boat, catching the dried twigs that surrounded the man. Almost instantly, the spark grew as the flames raced along the edges of the man’s body first, before slowly licking the shroud and engulfing the rest of the pyre.

Catelyn made a tiny noise as the flames began to grow. Hermione watched as Arya glanced up at her, alarm on her face. On the woman’s other side, Robb, too, glanced over, but it was Brynden who spoke.

“After thirty years of fighting, I... I think he'd forgotten what started’ it!”

Catelyn, distracted, turned to face her uncle. “I beg your pardon?”

Brynden shook his head, his greying hair a tangle in the wind. “Hoster. My brother. He asked me to stop calling myself ‘Blackfish.’ Said it was an old joke, and it was never funny to begin with.”

There was silence, as Edmure returned from where he stood at the edge of the pier to join the family in the line. Grey Wind huffed.

No one knew what to say to Catelyn to ease her pain at losing her father.

Hermione, realizing what he was doing, took a tiny half-shuffle forward and nudged into Robb’s back. Startled, he glanced at her, but she jerked her head a few times in his mother’s direction.

His eyes were wide and he glanced from her to his mother, panic on his face.

In response, Hermione inaudibly sighed and rolled her hand in a loose “go on” motion, looking between his mother and Brynden, hoping he caught on before the silence became too awkward. Apparently, he did, because Robb’s eyes grew round and he nodded, clearing his throat and loudly asking his great-uncle, “What did Grandfather say to that, uncle?”

Brynden flashed Robb a grim smile, partially in thanks for continuing the conversation topic, and for drawing Catelyn’s attention back to the story of her father.

“Well, I told Hoster, ‘People have been calling me “Blackfish” for so long, I don't remember my real name!”’ he chortled, although it was slightly forced.

But it worked; Catelyn had a small smile on her face, although it was bittersweet. “Every time he left for the Capitol, or to fight in a campaign, I'd see him off. ‘Wait for me, Little Cat,’ he’d say, ‘Wait for me and I'll come back to you.’ And I would sit at this window every day when the sun came up, waiting.” Her face crumpled. “I'll be waiting for a long time, now. Both father and -- and -- and N- Ned...”

Brynden was at his niece’s side, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as Catelyn cried.

This was what we were waiting for, thought Hermione with a mental sigh. Catelyn probably didn’t have time to mourn her husband since the news that he had been executed in King’s Landing, moving from one campaign to another with leading Robb and making their way to Riverrun. Maybe now she can begin to heal -- especially knowing her children are all alive and well.
Brynden and Catelyn leaving were the beginning of the exodus of others on the shore, all quietly returning to the castle where Edmure was now Lord of Riverrun, and Lord Paramount of the Trident. The man in question made his way to his best friend, Marq Piper; as well as Bracken, Blackwood, Karyl Vance and Jason Mallister, all who were with him during the Battle of the Trident.

Robb stepped up to Hermione with Arya at his side, Grey Wind’s tail swishing as they began to move. Robb’s face was a bit pale -- the effects of a hangover from his Nameday celebrations that merged with grief for a man he didn’t really know; and the grief for what his mother was going through, as well as stress from the war.

“Thank you for that,” he murmured to her.

Hermione gave a tiny shrug. “I think it was long overdue.” She then looked at Robb from the corner of her eyes, and in a tiny voice, suggested, “Maybe Brienne of Tarth would be a good companion for your mother to speak to?”

Robb’s mouth turned down. “She is a prisoner for helping the Kingslayer escape under my mother’s orders. You think putting her and my mother together in a room is a good idea?”

*Well, when you put it that way,* thought Hermione with a sarcastic tinge to her mental voice.

“I like Brienne,” said Arya suddenly, causing both Robb and Hermione to look at the young girl, who had been surprisingly silent. She was next to Grey Wind, walking beside him with her hand running through his fur with an occasional scratch around his neck.

“How do you know of Brienne?” asked Robb incredulously.

Arya shrugged, looking down at her nails.

“Arya,” warned Robb.

Finally, the dark-haired girl looked up. “She goes for walks with her guards. And she often stops by the lists. When Mother doesn’t need me, I’m down there too. I want to fight! Father had a dancing master for me in King’s Landing!”

“I--” Robb’s mouth dropped open and then snapped shut. His eyes cast about, looking for help and finding it in Hermione, who had her face slightly turned away, stifling a laugh.

Arya was on a roll, still listening to the things she wanted to do but couldn’t: “And I want to see what the men are doing! Someone can teach me to fight, like you and Hermione! Like Dacey! That way I won’t have to help Mother with stupid stuff -- like embroidery and needlepoint! I don’t want to wear dresses and be like stupid Sansa.”

“Well, I’m sure Dacey would prefer your company over mine, Arya,” said Hermione eventually, fighting to keep a smile on her face. A soft snort from behind her, where Dacey and Torrhen walked as guards, confirmed this.

“And Sansa isn’t stupid,” said Robb, but at Arya’s disbelieving look, he amended, “She just likes and believes in different things. She’s still our sister.”

A disgruntled expression settled on Arya’s long face. “I s’pose.”

“Speaking of Sansa,” said Hermione, steering the conversation away from something personal, “You know mirror I gave you, Robb? I have one for her, as well. And you, Arya.”
The disgruntled expression slid into confused disgust. “What would I want with a mirror?”

“Brilliant!” crowed Robb, a bit too loudly as those ahead of them from the funeral glanced back, forcing him to lower his voice. “But how are we going to get it to her?”

“I still think the plan of sneaking someone into King’s Landing as staff is the best option,” said Hermione. “People rarely look at those working.”

“I’ll find someone,” said Robb, with a solid, firm nod.

“Why is this mirror so important?” cried an impatient Arya, whose head had been bouncing between the two.

Robb turned towards his youngest sister. “You’ve seen the communication parchment Hermione made, right?” When she nodded, he continued. “The mirror is the same, but you can actually see the person you’re speaking to, as though they are in front of you!”

Arya’s eyes grew wide and turned silently to Hermione, who pulled out a small, unadorned mirror in the shape of a small pocket watch from her universe. She had gone to Gendry to commission it earlier when she finished the Stark bucket of pins; she was now working her way through the Tully bucket, as those had been completed first by the talented blacksmith.

The mirror itself was simple, round and compact. There was little design on it, for a girl who cared little of frivolity, but there was the direwolf of the Starks on the inside top, and the outside had a long thin sword which Gendry mumbled about a “needle” as well as two horns, or antlers, which he said was a bit of a creator’s mark for him.

Arya took the small mirror with trembling hands, clicking it open and gapping at her reflection in the transfigured glass Hermione placed inside. She had cast the spells, nonverbally, as just the thought of what she wanted to do was enough for the spells to take hold. Her wordless casting was becoming stronger.

“Just say the full name of the person you want to speak to,” instructed Hermione. “If you wished to speak to Robb, just say ‘Robb Stark,’ and his mirror would let him know one of his siblings wanted to speak to him. When you’re done your conversation, say ‘finite.’”

“All of us will have one?” asked Arya, slightly breathlessly, her grey eyes round.

Hermione nodded. “Just you and Robb for now. And me, I suppose.”

Arya launched herself at Hermione, across from Robb and causing him to stumble back a bit on his heels. The girl’s tiny, bony arms wrapped around Hermione’s waist and she squeezed tightly.

“Thank you,” she mumbled into Hermione’s jacket.

When she pulled back from Hermione, Robb glanced over and watched as Arya ran her fingers over the top of the mirror, over the thin sword and antlers. He frowned at the very not Stark-like face.

“Who made this for Arya? Or did you use your magic?”

“No, I asked Gendry to make it,” replied Hermione. “He said the antlers were a mark of his?”

Arya nodded. “When we first met, he was told by his blacksmith master to join the Black because he had no use for him anymore. Gendry had a bull’s head helm that he had made an’ his master allowed him to take it with him. Some of the other boys wanted it, but Gendry’s bigger than them and they didn’t ask again. When we were attacked an’ Yoren died, I took the helm and put it with another boy who died -- Lem -- and said that was Gendry because the Gold Cloaks were after him.”
“You saved his life,” said Robb quietly, looking at his sister a bit differently. Then, he muttered to himself, “Why did they want Gendry?”

Arya, who hadn’t heard him, nodded enthusiastically. “He’s big an’ strong. And he isn’t stupid! But I call him stupid -- he misses the obvious.”

“The pins he’s making for everyone are very nice,” commented Hermione, who had seen many of them up close at this point. She still had several buckets to work her way through, and Gendry was working almost constantly to fill Robb’s order. But, with an army of twenty-two thousand and over eight Northern houses with individual sigils, plus another ten or so Riverlands houses and *their* sigils, it was a lot for the blacksmith to do on his own.

“How are they coming along?” asked Robb, and something in his voice had Hermione thinking he was switching from ‘Robb Stark’ to ‘King Robb.’ She answered accordingly.

“Slowly, but steadily. He started with the largest orders first, such as the Starks, Boltons, and Manderlys. He’s almost done with those and then will be working on the next.”

“Good; are we still on schedule then?”

Hermione frowned. “It depends when you want things done, I suppose. At this rate, he’ll be done in a few months -- sorry, *moons* -- but if he had some help, they’d be done sooner. I can only cast the Portkey charm on them so many times, anyway.”

Arya was watching them curiously. “What are you spelling them for? What’s a Portkey?”

“Nothing you will need to worry about,” said Robb with a grin on his face. “And since when do you notice when boys are big and strong, Arya? And for him to *not* be stupid -- what a compliment from you!”

Arya’s face went red and she punched Robb in the side, hard. He expelled a breath of air with a loud ‘oof!’ just as Arya mumbled, “Who’s being stupid now?”

Asking Brienne to guard -- and be friends with -- Catelyn worked out. Brienne was feeling useless, and suitably guilty for her role of releasing Jaime Lannister, but it was warred with her loyalty to Catelyn and what the woman had asked of her. Eventually, after Hoster Tully’s funeral, Robb made the time to sit down with Brienne and thoroughly question her with Bolton, Umber, Karstark, and Maege with him; this included telling her of his sibling’s current locations and the damage his mother had unintentionally caused.

Brienne ended up being considered harmless -- as much as a superior swordswoman could be considered ‘harmless’ -- and employed by Robb to be Catelyn’s guard, although the role consisted of also being, at its most basic a spy in case Catelyn did anything similar to letting the Kingslayer go again, to being a friendly ear when she needed it. Hermione had seen Brienne around the castle, a tall, silent shadow walking at Catelyn’s side or just behind her, her sharp eyes taking in much of the going-on of Riverrun, learning her new place in the northern army.

(“Do you know what she and Jaime did their few months on the run?” Hermione had asked Robb one evening via the enchanted mirror; she was in her tent, charming a bucket of pins -- now on the Karstarks -- while Robb was up late in his study, going over correspondence.)

(“Some of it, but the rest she said was personal in nature,” replied Robb, his voice coming from a small distance as he had the mirror propped against an unlit candle.)
Hermione had hesitated. “I heard some when I was scrying. I think she loved Renly Baratheon.”

Robb shrugged, the darkness of the room casting shadows all over his face. His beard and the shadows made him appear older than he was. “It wouldn’t surprise me. Many people thought Renly handsome, but… well… there were rumours…”

“I heard. Jaime Lannister implied it, too.” They fell silent. Then: “I’m glad you let her stay. Your mother needs a friend that Edmure can’t be for her, and Brienne needed purpose again.”

Robb sighed, but gave Hermione a small, tired smile.)

At some point, a week later from when they brought him back, Jaime Lannister had woken from his fever, utterly horrified by the stump of his right hand and the loss of his sword hand. Hermione had only seen him once more -- the man’s guards on the room used their swords to push food on a tray through the wards, leaving the once-shining golden-haired man tarnished and battered.

The man had ignored Hermione’s presence the entire time, his head turned away and looking out his window as he sat up on the bed, his arm with the stump thrown as far from his body as he could do so.

Hermione left some potions to speed up his healing, as well as a warm meal. When she did eventually return to the room the next day, the potion bottles were empty, the meal was consumed, and the Kingslayer was asleep.

And, in a strange way, Hermione’s heart ached for the man.

She did not have time to dwell on it, though. Time slipped from her, as her days repeated: wake up, eat breakfast in the Great Hall with the others, and spend the morning in the library at Riverrun studying what mentions of magic they had or Vyman found for her. After taking diligent notes, she would have lunch delivered to her room, and then she would change and meet Torrhen and Dacey for physical training, with Dacey showing her hand-to-hand combat, and Torrhen would work with her to use her magic alongside his sword.

After two hours of that, she would return to her tent, shower, and then join Robb in his war room, with others he’d invite in specifically for whatever session he was hosting. They would discuss his plans for returning North, for finding Bran and Rickon, and for the next war on the Ironborn once they were back on their lands.

Then, it would be a very late dinner in the war room. Depending on who was with them that afternoon (usually Karstark, Bolton, Umber, and Bracken and Blackwood), the Lords would make their excuses and eat elsewhere, leaving Hermione and Robb alone. There, they would discuss anything and everything that came to mind.

But that afternoon, two months after Hoster Tully’s passing and Edmure’s transition to Lord Tully and Lord Paramount of the Trident, Robb had called a full meeting of all the northern and riverlands lords, as Hermione wanted to present her idea to keep the Lannisters from retaliating on the riverlands once the large northern army returned home.

“So what is this grand plan that Lady Hermione has for us?” asked Greatjon Umber, his arms crossed.

The war room was full: everyone representing their house was there, seated around the long rectangular table, looking towards Robb at its head, the fireplace lit behind him. Some had goblets of ale next to their hands, and a few others, such as the young Lyman Darry, had a plate of finger food.
“We’ll wait for her to begin,” said Robb firmly, standing at the head, before he turned partially to watch the flames. Grey Wolf lounged in front of the fire, but his ears were perked and his eyes were watchful as more people streamed into the room until there was a gentle lull of soft murmurs and voices, with the occasional burst of conversation.

Olyvar approached Robb, offering him a cup of ale, which Robb indicated at the table, and then the door opened once more and Hermione slinked in, her hair bushier than normal, a feverish look in her eyes that was triumphant, and a heavy tome in her arms.

Robb felt his stomach tighten at the sight of her, and he quickly turned and sat in his chair, which prompted his lords to do the same, their personal conversations cutting off as they realized he was ready to begin.

Hermione eased into the seat at Robb’s right, placing the book on the table with a muffled thunk.

Umber’s eyes cut to his King and seemed to say, well, now that we’re here -- so Robb cleared his throat. “As you know, I have spent some time discussing how the Northern army will return to the North while leaving the riverlands protected and without fear of Lannister retribution.”

There were some shifts and low murmurs but no one spoke up.

“I asked Lady Hermione to look into this several moons ago, and recently, she came up with a solution that I think will work for us going forward,” he finished, turning to Hermione who then stood from her seat.

Immediately, close to forty eyes fell on her, and she fought the urge to squirm. Was this how Harry always felt? Eyes on him? she grimaced and busied herself with tapping her wand on the book so it opened to the right page. She summoned a map of the Riverlands and the surrounding area, laying in on the table, and then dug out some rocks from her pocket to scatter on the table. A nonverbal spell had them rearrange themselves into a miniature of Harrenhal where the castle once sat on the map.

“Right. So.” She cleared her throat nervously, glancing at Robb who smiled at her in warm approval. Heat filled her, and she felt herself relax, just a smidge. Looking back around the table, Hermione let her voice carry so everyone -- even those at the furthest end, like Black Walder, Galbert Glover, and Ronald Vance.

“As you all know, several, erm, moons ago, King Robb asked Lord Bolton and I to rescue his sister, Princess Arya, from Harrenhal,” said Hermione, hating the use of formal titles for people she was familiar with. There were nods around the table, though, so she continued, using her wand to mimic the destruction of Harrenhal. The miniature broke apart, pieces landing here or there silently on the table.

“I asked Lady Hermione to look into this several moons ago, and recently, she came up with a solution that I think will work for us going forward,” he finished, turning to Hermione who then stood from her seat.

Immediately, close to forty eyes fell on her, and she fought the urge to squirm. Was this how Harry always felt? Eyes on him? she grimaced and busied herself with tapping her wand on the book so it opened to the right page. She summoned a map of the Riverlands and the surrounding area, laying in on the table, and then dug out some rocks from her pocket to scatter on the table. A nonverbal spell had them rearrange themselves into a miniature of Harrenhal where the castle once sat on the map.

“Right. So.” She cleared her throat nervously, glancing at Robb who smiled at her in warm approval. Heat filled her, and she felt herself relax, just a smidge. Looking back around the table, Hermione let her voice carry so everyone -- even those at the furthest end, like Black Walder, Galbert Glover, and Ronald Vance.

“As you all know, several, erm, moons ago, King Robb asked Lord Bolton and I to rescue his sister, Princess Arya, from Harrenhal,” said Hermione, hating the use of formal titles for people she was familiar with. There were nods around the table, though, so she continued, using her wand to mimic the destruction of Harrenhal. The miniature broke apart, pieces landing here or there silently on the table.

A few lords were leaning forward to watch.

“The pieces of Harrenhal are scattered. The destruction of the castle was meant as a deterrent from others using the strategic location and a staging ground for future attacks on the riverlands and further north,” explained Hermione. “But this does not stop Lannisters -- or Tyrells, or Martells, or anyone else -- from just walking up.”

“What are you suggesting then, Lady Hermione?” asked Lord Karstark, his tone polite but with a tinge of impatience.

Hermione waved her wand and the largest pieces of the Harrenhal miniature rose and then began to spread out, forming a line along the border of the riverlands and the Lannister westerlands, the Vale
of Arryn, and the southerly crownlands under Lannister-Baratheon control. The line was impressive, stretching in a vague U-shape, scooped with an opening at the top where the Neck was.

“A warded line of defense,” said Hermione. “Each stone will be infused with the blood of your houses, and each stone will be transfigured into a watchtower, linked together with a barrier that will keep anyone from crossing over into the riverlands. The only entrance will be through each tower, constantly manned by representatives from that House.”

“And if the tower is stormed by our enemies or destroyed?” asked Glover, a tight frown on his face from the far end of the table.

“The wards I’ve selected for this will be charmed alongside spells such as the impervius, muggle repellant, and fire resistance,” said Hermione, turning to Glover directly. “They could launch a constant bombardment of flaming projectiles from a trebuchet and it would do nothing but shake the tower.”

There were murmurs of surprise along the table, running up and down at her announcement.

“Explain these wards some more,” ordered Umber loudly, eyes focused on Hermione. “Have you used them before?”

She flushed, fidgeting a bit. “Erm, well, not really.” She looked up at the ceiling. “They’re kind of… um… illegal in my world.”

“Illegal?” echoed Marq Piper, Edmure’s closest friend. He was a similar age -- just slightly older than her and Robb -- with an easy, charming grin and strawberry blond hair and blue eyes over a lightly freckled face. “What does that mean?”

“Where I’m from, spells like this are considered illegal,” explained Hermione, in a detached, clinical way. “The government regulates who practices what kinds of spells to protect its people from potential backlash.”

At that, Bolton frowned. “What kind of backlash? How dangerous is this for you to cast?”

“Oh, it’s not really dangerous, per se,” replied Hermione, with a tiny shrug. “Because of the use of blood, to personalize the wards, it’s considered Dark Arts. But since I’m not using the magic to control anyone - this just allows your descendants access to the watchtowers as well. You control who can come through your specific tower freely. I’ll link the tower to a parchment like our communication ones, and you write the name of everyone who has access in and out of your tower. If you don’t want them to have access anymore, you cross their name out.”

“That’s… fairly simple,” said a stupefied Manderly, his jovial Santa-Claus features strangely solemn. He ran a hand down his white beard. “And this is connected through our blood?”

Hermione nodded. “Inside each tower, I can make the space as small or large as you want. As comfortable as you want: bedchambers, kitchen, a hall to eat in, an armoury. The inside can be whatever you want while the outside remains the same.”

Karstark started laughing. “Like your tent!”

“Houses Wode and Darry are on the Kingsroad,” explained Hermione, turning two of the stones into small towers. “They’d be in control of any trade coming further north, so they need larger amounts of people to vet who comes and goes through their gates. Mooton and Hawick are on the Trident, where the river runs out to the ocean. They need a bit more extravagant towers to cover the width of the river.”
“Like the Twins?” asked Black Walder darkly with a scowl. “We already have two towers that span the Trident; we don’t need more.”

“This just ensures that boats don’t sneak past the wards,” said Hermione evenly, not letting her distaste for the Frey show. “It’s like not like the Freys have the proprietary rights to a double-tower spanning a waterway.”

Infusing the stones on the table to turn into towers as she said their names, lighting up to highlight their position on the table, Hermione continued. “Heading westward, towards the westerlands, we have Wode at the Kingsroad, and then what was Whent’s seat -- Harrenhal -- Goodbrook, Smallwood, Lord Ronald Vance’s seat and then we finish with Lord Piper, by the westerlands. Then we swing north, along the mountains with Wayn, Ryger, and Grell.”

Everyone’s eyes watched as the rocks morphed into towers and they lit up, a flameless version of beacons being lit, outlining the border. They were all now looking at the western edge of the map, along the coast by Ironman’s Bay, near the Pyke.

“Lord Blackwood, Lord Mallister, and Lord Erenford make up the western coast defense,” continued Hermione. “Then, we’re in the Neck, which is all marsh, and into Northern territory. These defenses can be added to the North, as well, much later -- to help those at Flint’s Fingers and those by Blazewater Bay.

“Back along the Kingsroad, holding the eastern border would be Shawney, north of the Darry main tower,” across the map, one rock twisted and rose into a new tower. “Followed north with House Haigh and then with Vypren. The space in between each of the towers would be warded -- an invisible barrier that will stop any humans from crossing it. I won’ do the same for any animals, though -- you still want grazing and bird migration to happen.”

“This is… quite impressive, Lady Hermione,” began Edmure. “But what of those houses, like Tully -- and Bracken, Lychester, Roote, and Lord Karyl Vance, who are further inland from these borders?”

Hermione nodded, having thought of that. “You’ll strengthen the spaces between the towers. I’ll add smaller stones, especially between the larger distances of towers, for, um, power boosts, so to speak.”

She directed smaller stones with her magic to large gaps, between Mooton and Wode, Piper and Ryger, Blackwood and Mallister, and Haigh and Shawney. As she finished, with all the towers emitting a soft glow, a connected line appeared between them and flared upwards, toward the ceiling. A visible, sparking silver barrier linked all the houses together along the watchtowers, encasing the U-shaped border and securing the riverlands from anything south.

“But how long will this last?” asked a plaintive Goodbrooke, who would be on the highly defensible line of incoming Lannister forces.

“As long as you need it,” replied Hermione, pitching her voice so everyone heard. “Consider it like a blood sacrifice -- as long as the head of your house, or the next heir, constantly add their blood -- say once a year -- then the protections will last. If you fail to do so, that area of the border will eventually weaken and dissipate.”

There were grumblings now. “Blood sacrifice! That’s a heathen practice. Good southern men don’t worship the Old Ways.”

Robb stood. “You’ll have to if you want a free defense.” The room fell silent. “Lady Hermione does not have to do this. She can leave us to patrol a length border on three sides. Her spell and
protections will do this for us, leaving only a small tower to be manned with however many men you prefer. The communication parchments between the towers will keep us all informed of what movement there is, or whether you are being attacked. There will be a choke point for any invading forces, which will be defensible from our end. Will you willingly throw this away because of a little blood?"

The men at the table began to mutter to themselves, and quickly, the room descended into loud discussions and shouted questions. Some immediately agreed -- like Bracken and Blackwood, as well as Lyman Darry who didn’t have the men to patrol a large area to begin with; others were more hesitant, unsure of her magic.

The discussion lasted long into the night, with Robb championing her spell, as well as Hermione’s friends and supporters among the riverlands Lords, and the northern lords sitting in on the discussion. Slowly, one by one, the other houses came onboard, agreeing until all that was left was Walder Frey.

An unexpected benefit of having the wards go up was that any Lannister men left within when the ward went up would no be able to leave the border unless they went North, into the Neck. And that included the Mountain and his men, whom everyone wanted dead. With that, Frey, the last holdout to the plan, finally agreed with a long-suffering sigh.

Blood was collected and labelled immediately by those who could provide and plans were made to begin the defense. Hermione would have to sacrifice her research mornings to Apparate to Harrenhal as a starting point for the towers, and she would have to work quickly so that any Lannister scouts didn’t report back what was happening in the riverlands.

“It’s late,” announced Robb eventually, casting a glance around the room. Lyman Darry had fallen asleep several hours earlier, slouched in his chair, and many, including him, were stifling yawns. “We’ll continue our agenda at a later time.”

Slowly, everyone began to file out of the room, until only him and Hermione, eyes tired and dry and her voice scratchy from constantly speaking.

“Thank you,” he said quietly as the fire, already low, crackled, and popped behind him. The dying fire cast dark shadows in the room, giving it an intimate, closed feeling.

Hermione looked up from the table, where she sliding the book forward to place in her beaded bag. “Hmm?”

“For your solution,” clarified Robb, facing her and stopping her movements with a hand on her arm. “This gives me a way to return to Winterfell without losing their support. I can remain King in the North and the Riverlands because of you.”

“You say that now, but talk to me when I actually get this complete,” she complained, but a smile belayed her words. “It will work, though. It'll just take me two weeks or so, from start to finish.”

“Will you be safe?” asked Robb, peering intently at her.

Hermione frowned. “Safe how? From Lannisters? I can have Torrhen come with me, you know. And anyone else you assign.” She finished with an eye roll.

Robb shook his head. “No, I mean -- your magic. Will it be safe? You won’t hurt yourself?”

“Oh. You mean overextend my magic.” Hermione shook her head. “It’ll be fine. I’ll take proper breaks. If I’m only working in the mornings, it won’t harm me.”
Robb’s face remained skeptical.

“I promise!” emphasized Hermione with a grin.

“Very well,” sighed Robb. He glanced at Grey Wind, whose jaw stretched wide as he yawned, but slowly lumbered to his feet. “May I escort you back to your room, Lady Hermione?”

Hermione felt a blush spread across her cheeks, but she tucked her hand into Robb’s elbow and grinned. “You may.”

They left the room. Outside, Riverrun was quiet, much of the castle sleeping. Some servants still scurried about, and a guard here or there nodded respectfully to their king, but otherwise, the only noise was Grey wind’s nails scratching the stone under his paws.

“Now, Lady Hermione,” said Robb, a gleam in his blue eyes, “Tell me about this idea of a peace summit…?”

Then Hermione’s laugh broke the silence, and a smile spread across Robb’s face.

Sansa wasn’t sure why she had been summoned to the Small Council -- it wasn't like a traitor's daughter or a traitor's sister was worth much in King's Landing these days. But, she followed behind Ser Meryn, keeping her head down and her eyes forward as she focused on the heels of his armoured boots and the flapping edge of his white cloak as they walked the halls from her bedchambers to wherever he was taking her.

Eventually, he stopped before a door.

“You're to go in here,” he said gruffly, an unpleasant look on his face.

Sansa’s own blue eyes darted up and then down quickly. She threw her shoulders back and tilted her chin up, for a moment, and stepped through the door. As soon as she did so, she quickly assessed the room: it was a small, intimate, but large enough for a table, chairs, and several seats of various heights and cushions.

*Not the Small Council then,* she thought, as there was a -- not so spirited, but enthusiastic -- conversation occurring that she walked right into, ranging between Joffrey, Tyrion, Cersei, all in various shades of Lannister gold or red. Their father Tywin, with a new black leather eye patch in the middle of a vivid red line that ran vertically up from his cheekbone to his forehead and Lord Varys in his bright yellow robes, hands tucked into the voluminous sleeves.

Joffrey, resplendent in a bright, shiny gold tunic over black trousers, was deeply scowling at Varys from his chair; in what he probably thought was an indolent sprawl. “--ster of Whisperers. You’re supposed to know everything!”

The short, bald spy cleared his throat and said, solemnly, “No man can be in all rooms at all times. I have many little birds in the Riverlands, My Lord, but I don’t hear any songs from Riverrun.”

Joffrey slammed a hand down on the arm of his chair, making Sansa wince. “The Stark forces are distracted. Now is the time to strike!”

There was a loud scoff, and Sansa’s eyes moved from Joffrey, whom she watched like a hawk at all times to gauge his moods, to see the Imp -- Tyrion Lannister -- play with his goblet full of wine, swirling it around. Behind him, his manservant, a scruffy sellsword named Bronn, rolled his eyes.
“To strike?” questioned Tyrion, his voice lilting and rolling with a sardonic cant. “My dear nephew, you do see the men preparing the walls for siege? You do understand Stannis Baratheon sails this way?”

Stannis? wondered Sansa, eyes growing wide. He is on his way to King’s Landing? To besiege it?

“If my uncle Stannis lands on the shores of King’s Landing, I’ll ride out to greet him!” declared Joffrey, sounding petulant and arrogant at the same time.

Tyrion didn’t bother hiding his disdain at his nephew’s words. “A brave choice, Your Grace. I’m sure your men will line up behind you.”

“Like anyone would follow you,” broke in Cersei nastily, glaring at her brother.

Tyrion merely toasted her with his goblet.

Paying neither of them attention, Joffrey mused aloud, his voice soft in the room as he gazed dreamily in the distance, “They say Stannis never smiles. I’ll give him a red smile, from ear to ear. We’ll see how he can burn our temples and my subjects then!”

“Oh, for the Seven’s sake,” muttered Tyrion, who Sansa stood nearest to and was, therefore, able to hear as he spoke to Bronn, “The Lord of Light wants his enemies burned. The Drowned God wants them drowned. Why are all the gods such vicious cunts? Where is the god of tits and wine?”

Apparently, it wasn’t quiet enough, because Varys spoke up from where he was frowning at the others in the room. “In the Summer Isles, they worship a fertility goddess with sixteen teats.”

Shock overrode Tyrion’s face and then he widely grinned, placing his goblet down firmly on the tabletop. “We should sail there immediately!”

“Enough!” snapped Tywin, speaking for the first time since Sansa entered the room. “We will not speak of this yet -- there are other things to focus on before Stannis’ fleet arrives. Tyrion, send your man away.”

Tyrion waved Bronn goodbye, and the man silently left, although Sansa was sure he was going to remain just outside the door, picking at the dirt under his nails with a trusty dagger he carried around, even in the Red Keep. Cersei’s mouth pulled down into a deep frown as she looked around those who remained in the room, her cool eyes lingering on Tyrion and Sansa.

“What’s she doing here?” the woman said, her honeyed tones barely hiding her disdain for Sansa. Tywin’s mouth pulled down in a manner identical to hers. Sansa fought her growing hysteria and desperately focused on not laughing at the eerily similar faces the two were making. “Our business concerns her as well.” He turned to Sansa, ordering, “Sit.”

Sansa moved to the free chair beside Tyrion, who gallantly rose from his seat and help pull hers back for her despite barely reaching halfway up the back of the chair. She gingerly sat on the edge, hands folded in her lap and her back rammord straight.

“Thank you, My Lord,” she murmured to the nicest of the Lannisters.

Tyrion nodded and resumed his seat, busying himself with his wine, just as Tywin began speaking.

“We have something important to discuss,” the man said, his voice commanding the attention of everyone in the room. “It seems, Tyrion, that your new friends the Tyrells are plotting to marry Lady
Sansa to Sir Loras."

Sansa’s heart stopped. *How did they find out? How did they know?*

Her entire being froze and she was certain that her head would soon grace the same pike that her father’s once rested on. At her side, Sansa saw Tyrion glance at her over the rim of his goblet and then say, carefully, “Oh?”

The frown on Tywin’s face deepened at the lack of anything else from his youngest son, so he turned his eyes on Sansa. She did her best not to squirm under the cold, icy glare.

“Do you have anything to add or say about this, Lady Sansa?”

Sansa’s folded hands trembled in her lap, so she clenched them tightly, glad that no one could see them under the table, except for Tyrion whose face went carefully blank, his eyes watchful.

She cleared her throat and chirped, hoping her voice didn’t tremble. “I -- I, no, My Lord. I had no idea --”

Joffrey laughed loudly. “She never does--”

“Silence!” snapped Tywin, his head snapping around to face his grandson. He then brought a hand up and traced the edge of his new eyepatch. Sansa had heard rumours of how it happened: at Harrenhal as he and the Mountain escaped from her brother’s forces under Roose Bolton’s command, something about magic and a witch -- but she didn’t believe that.

Instead, the head of the Lannister family began muttering to himself. “I bring them into the royal fold and this is how they repay me? By trying to steal the key to the North out from under me.”

*Is he... is he going insane?* wondered Sansa momentarily, shocked at the change in the man, and very, very frightened. She had already seen cruelty and madness in Joffrey and Cersei’s eyes -- it was clear it was a family trait beyond the rumours of Joffrey’s parentage.

Tyrion frowned, his eyes rooted on his father. Carefully, he said, “Lady Sansa is the key to the North? I seem to remember she has an older brother. And rumours of a witch that does his bidding.”

Tywin twitched.

“A witch! My Lord--” began Varys, only for Tywin to cut him off, ignoring the spymaster entirely.

“The Young Wolf’s days are numbered,” the old man said firmly, his remaining eye focusing on Tyrion alone. “There are -- plans -- in place to counter these ridiculous rumours. Besides, if the pup plans to return to Winterfell, which all accounts are saying, then he will lose half his army through the desertion of the River lords. Further, Theon Greyjoy murdered both his brothers; and the youngest female whelp cannot inherit. That makes Lady Sansa here the heir to Winterfell. As for the witch --”

Tyrion quickly interjected as well, shaking his head. “There’s no such thing. She’s some kind of woods witch if anything. *Useless.*”

“Magic *exists,* My Lord. Magic is dangerous and clever and strong and can take the shape of anything,” said Varys, sounding the most emotional Sansa had ever heard (although she wasn’t around the man that often, she did know that he maintained a certain facade that most of the time projected serenity). “It can warp the mind, dull our senses, and kill us all. *I know this--*”
“That is enough, Spider,” said Tywin, his voice frigid. “Your paranoia and hysteria will not help. Now, with Lady Sansa reassuring us of her thoughts on the Tyrells, we can issue a refusal as her guardians—”

“The Tyrell army is helping us to win this war!” said Tyrion, eyes narrowed, a vague panicked tone to his voice. “Do you really think it's wise to refuse them?”

“There's nothing to refuse. The Tyrells have no say over Lady Sansa; she was set to marry Joffrey before this -- unpleasantness -- with her father and brother began,” there was a downward turn of Tywin’s mouth, “and as such, we can see to her care and wellbeing. Instead of waiting until after Joffrey's wedding, we will act first.”

There was silence and then Tyrion asked, “And how do we do that?”

“We find Lady Sansa a different husband -- one that best fits her status and will care for her, will watch over her,” announced Tywin to a suddenly silent and chilly room.

Sansa felt her stomach roll and she did her best to keep nausea from appearing on her face at the thought of the Lannisters picking her future husband. There would be no knights, no gallant figures on horseback coming to save her if they had anything to say….

“Wonderful,” said Tyrion, mostly forced joviality in his voice, although there was something brittle to it, that made Sansa wonder if he too, could feel the foreboding chill of what was to come.

Cersei’s grin was sharklike. “Yes, it is.”

Sansa’s heart sank, and Tyrion, at her side, turned his head from Cersei to Tywin, his eyes growing wider as his mouth dropped open in realization. Tywin nodded at him, once.

“You can't mean it!” protested Tyrion, slamming his goblet down and then hopping off the chair to leave the room. Varys moved out of the way near the door so he was out of direct eyesight.

“Tyrion! Get back here!” snapped Tywin in response, making the dwarf turn on his heel, a bitter expression on his face. “I can and I do.”

Sansa was numb, watching the family spectacle in front of her. Across, lounging on his chair, Joffrey swung his legs around and sat up, laughing. It was almost a cackle. “Congratulations, My Lady!”

Survival instincts flooded her, and through bloodless lips, Sansa heard herself, from far away, say prettily, “Thank you, your Grace.”

Apparently, Tywin was fooled by her words, despite her suddenly pale face. He turned back to his youngest. “And you, Tyrion? What do you say?”

“What do I say?” repeated Tyrion, incredulously. “She's a child!”

“You should be thanking the gods for this,” sneered Cersei, moving to a sideboard to pour herself some Arbour Gold wine. “This is more than you deserve.”

Joffrey still had a smile on his face, malicious glee in his eyes as he spoke directly to Sansa, who met the King’s face head-on. “You'll be married to a Lannister! Soon you will have a Lannister baby. It's a dream come true for you, isn't it? What a glorious day!”

Sansa swallowed thickly, her fingernails digging viciously into the fleshy part of her hand. “Yes, Your Grace.”
It was as if Joffrey didn’t hear her, however, as he continued speaking. “Although, I suppose it doesn’t really matter which Lannister puts the baby into you. Maybe I’ll pay you a visit after my uncle passes out. How’d you like that?”

Horror stole over Sansa, as her worst fears began to play in front of her eyes.

“You wouldn’t?” asked Joffrey, lightly, but there was something dangerous in his words. “Well, that’s all right. Ser Meryn and Ser Boris will hold you down—”

“That’s enough, Joff. Tyrion will do as he’s bid,” said Tywin, glaring at first his grandson, who mulishly fell silent under the hard stare leveled on him, and then to Tyrion, who turned his back and stared out a nearby window. “As will you, Cersei.”

All heads swiveled in the Queen’s direction. Even Cersei, who had a smug smirk on her face, had the expression drop. Her arms, which were crossed, fell open at her sides. “What do you mean?”

Tywin gave her a tight-lipped smile. “You'll marry Ser Loras.”

No! thought Sansa, eyes growing wide at Margaery's sweet brother being forced to marry the shrewish and cruel Queen.

“I will not,” laughed Cersei.

Tywin’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, you will. You're still fertile. You need to marry again and breed.”

“Breed?” shrieked Cersei, her hands fisting at her side as her shoulders went up and she leaned forward towards her father. “I am Queen Regent, not some broodmare!”

“You’re my daughter!” the words thundered in the small room, rendering everyone momentarily senseless. No one had heard Tywin raise his voice that way before. “You will do as I command and you will marry Loras Tyrell.”

Cersei took an aborted step forward, the red of her dress catching the fading sunlight as it filtered in through the window, turning it bloody and dark. “Father, don't make me do it again, please.”

Tywin was unmoved. “Not another word. My children.” His gaze swept from Cersei to Tyrion, who was still ignoring him. There was a disgusted curl to his lip. “You've disgraced the Lannister name for far too long. Now, I shall go have Pycelle announce it, and Joff, you will give your blessing. With Sansa and Tyrion’s upcoming nuptials, you can continue to woo, and win, Lady Margaery.”

When Joffrey went to protest, Tywin snarled, “That means now, Joffrey.”

The unhappy King rose to his feet and stomped through the room and out the door, snapping as he stepped out, “Hound! With me!”

Cersei, who twirled to watch her son leave the room, turned back to face her father, ire flashing in her face. “I won’t allow this!”

Tywin rolled his eyes. “Yes, you will.”

The two left the room, Cersei chasing after her father, squabbling about her upcoming marriage, about Joffrey’s. The silence that fell in the room was uncomfortable, and Sansa fought the urge to fidget. Her mother and Septa Mordane hated when she fidgeted -- that was something Arya did instead -- so she sat still, hoping not to draw anyone’s attention.

Finally, Tyrion swore under his breath and stalked over to the same sideboard Cersei had stood
beside, pouring himself another drink. “What a shit show. And you -- Varys! Gods, man, you don’t truly believe this about a witch in Robb Stark’s camp?”

Varys’ eyes narrowed, and his head tilted slightly. “Before all that familial nastiness, I was going to tell you the story of why I dislike magic. Do you want to hear it?”

Tyrion started, his eyes cutting straight to Sansa as he looked at her over his shoulder from pouring his drink. Sansa was surprised to realize he remembered she was there.

“I don’t know,” he finally said, slowly. “Do I? Will it upset Lady Sansa?”

There was a tiny shrug of voluminous yellow robes. “If such a creature is allied with her brother, she should know what a witch is capable of.”

When no one said anything else, Varys nodded and began.

“As a boy, in Myr, I traveled with a troupe of actors through the Free Cities. One day, a man approached my master with an offer too tempting to refuse. I feared the man meant to use me, as I’d heard some men use small boys, but what he wanted was far worse. He gave me a potion that made me powerless to move or speak, yet did nothing to dull my senses,” the man said, his voice light and airy as though he was reciting a piece of news to the Small Council.

Sansa swallowed, a part of her understanding what was coming next.

“With a hooked blade, he sliced me, root and stem, chanting all the while. He burned my parts on a brazier.”

Sansa turned her head and tried not to gag.

Varys sent her a sympathetic glance, but said, his voice stronger, “The flames burned blue, and I heard a voice answer his call. I still dream of that night. Not of the sorcerer, not of his blade...I dream of the voice. Was it a god? A demon? Some conjurer's trick? I don't know, but the sorcerer called and a voice answered. And ever since that day, I have hated magic, and all who practice it.”

Tyrion hummed a little under his breath and walked over to his vacant chair next to Sansa. “And you think that this witch will do the same to Robb Stark? Is capable of this?”

Sansa paled further. No! Not Robb! Not more of my family! I don’t want to be the only one left!

“We know very little about her,” admitted Varys slowly. “And what we do know is very different to any magic I have learned of over the years. It is not a magic of Westeros or Essos. It is unknown. The unknown is dangerous.”

The man then turned and glided out of the room, leaving Sansa with horrifying visions of Robb being torn apart by some shadowy madwoman whose laugh sounded like Cersei’s.

“Well, this is quite the mess we find ourselves in.”

Sansa started and turned her head back around to face the short man at her side at the table, where he was drumming his fingers thoughtfully.

“Um, my Lord?”

He sighed. “Tyrion, Sansa. My name is Tyrion.” He then gulped the rest of his wine noisily.

“Can we -- that is -- will we--” she closed her eyes and stilled her breath, then opened her eyes and
tried again, her voice strong. “Will the wedding be soon?”

Tyrion shook his head, a strangled laugh emerging from him. “Not at all. It’ll be a long engagement. Astoundingly long…”

Sansa frowned. “What?”

“Neck!” the man grinned at her and Sansa was surprised to see such an open and friendly expression on a Lannister. “You have one. How old are you, exactly?”

Sansa paused. “Sixteen.”

“Well, talk won't make you any older,” sighed Tyrion. “My lord father has commanded us to marry, and while we’re here, it would be best to listen to the old man.”

Shakily, Sansa reached for his goblet, saw that there were a few gulps left, and quickly downed the rest of the bitter liquid.

Tyrion snatched the now-empty goblet from her hand. “Stop! Goodness, Sansa -- I’m not that bad, am I?”

“I -- ah -- No, My Lord…” she blushed heavily under his mismatched eyes and turned her chin away.

Tyrion sighed again, loudly, and long. “Despite my father decreeing that we marry, nothing else will happen, My Lady. If my father wants someone to get fucked, I know where he can start.” There was a momentary pause, and then Sansa felt a hand touch one of hers in her lap. She whipped her head around to stare at him. “I won't share your bed. Not until you want me to.”

She swallowed, looking down at his hand on hers. She whispered, “What if I never want you to?”

Tyrion’s face when he spoke. “‘And so my Watch begins.’” He stood, slipping off the chair and holding his hand out to Sansa. “Come -- I’ll return you to your room. Not only must we prepare for our upcoming wedding, but we must prepare for Stannis when he arrives.”

Their walk back to her bedchambers was quiet, both lost in their own thoughts. Bronn trailled behind, discreetly, never speaking but a constant presence that Sansa was acutely aware of the entire time.

Tyrion left her by her door, and she slipped inside, carefully shutting it and bolting it from an errant Kingsguard or the King himself from wandering in. If I had to marry a Lannister, thought Sansa, at least it’s a kind one.

She sighed and trudged over to a chair by the fire, where she had left an unfinished needlepoint project. Yet, as she passed her bed, something on the cover caught the glint of the fading sunlight coming from her window and balcony.

Sansa picked it up and admired her face in the polished lens: a long face, much of the baby fat long gone from stress; slight bags under her eyes and pale. Vibrant blue Tully eyes framed by long, thin red hair in an elaborate hairdo favoured by the Southron women in King’s Landing.

I am no longer the girl who believed in knights in shining armour, thought Sansa, her eyes sad and desperate for escape. She moved to put the mirror back down where she found it, not wanting to be accused of stealing -- as Cersei would take joy in doing so -- when she realized that was something
else on her bed.

Tucked underneath the mirror had been a strange parchment, with flowing cursive in an unfamiliar hand: *speak the name of your family and it shall be heard.*

*What in the Mother’s name is this?* wondered Sansa, her fingers tracing the strange script and odd instructions. *Speak the name of my family? Do they mean Stark? Or someone like -- Robb? This is all very strange.*

“My Lady? Lady Sansa? Are you decent?” Shay’s voice broke into Sansa’s thoughts. “It’s nearly time to get ready for the evening meal, My Lady, and I have your dress. I’m here to do your hair, as well!”

Sansa hurriedly stuffed the note and mirror under the corner of her bed cover, smoothing the fabric down.

“One moment, Shay,” she called back.

She then scurried to the door, promptly forgetting all about the mirror and note. She had other things to worry about in King’s Landing.

__________________________________________________

TBC...
I:XVIII

Chapter Notes

An image of the fort Hermione creates is similar to the Saalburg Roman fort, which you can click on the link, to see what I was trying to describe.

The Winter Witch

XVIII

Despite her projections, Hermione took longer than two weeks to complete the defensive line and the blood wards that bordered the Riverlands.

She initially began at Harrenhal, collecting the various, and plentiful, chunks of stone that littered the landscape. Some pieces were small - no longer than the size of her fist - and others were larger than the dragon she, Harry, and Ron escaped on from Gringotts. With transfiguration being one of Hermione's favourite classes, the idea behind creating watchtowers from the remains of Harrenhal seemed practical and easy at first; then, upon seeing the massive remnants of the fortress, Hermione felt the daunting process begin to press down on her.

"So, what's first?" asked Torrhen, one of her guards for that morning. He, along with his brother Eddard, Daryn, Dacey, her mother Maege, and a ragtag group of various volunteers from the other Houses - predominantly being Bolton, Karstark, Umber, or Manderly - had fanned out, looking in various directions to ensure that Vargo Hoat's sellswords were no longer lingering in the area, especially after screaming about wanting Hermione dead.

"Well -" began Hermione, biting her lip. "Transfiguration laws states that it is easier to transfigure one thing into something else, as long as the state it was originally in had something in common to what it would be converted into."

"Which is what you're doing," broke in Eddard loudly, tossing the words over his shoulder. Despite being several feet away and facing south, he was clearly paying attention to the conversation.

Perhaps this is novel for him, thought Hermione with an eye roll. She was so used to Torrhen just going along with what she said - having seen her magic in action - that she was unused to others needing clarification.

"Yes, Eddard, that is what I am going to do," she answered with a sigh. "The watchtowers will be made out of the same stone that made Harrenhal. I'm just going to transfigure its shape - reworking it at its molecular level to reshape it without actually changing the properties. In essence, I'm rather charming the stone for aesthetic purposes. But by using transfiguration, the alterations will be permanent since I'm not actually deconstructing the base elements that make up the stone."

Eddard blinked slowly at her. "Umm…"

Hermione's sigh was much louder. "There's literally an equation I need to follow. It's maths. Don't worry about it."
"What's the first step?" asked Torrhen instead.

"Collecting the stones," answered Hermione primly. "Which means I'm just going to shrink everything down for the next few days, and then distribute them to the locations we plotted on the map back at Riverrun?" She looked around at the men and offered a grimace. "This is going to be a very long and boring time for you."

She wasn't wrong; it took her the better part of two weeks just to collect the largest of the stones and shrink them down to place in a separate bag with an undetectable expansion charm on it (as she certainly wasn't willing to clog up her beaded bag). Without Harrenhal to dominate or focus as a feature point for the God's Eye Lake, the gently rolling hills were far more picturesque and Hermione could actually see the hazy, mirage-like grey smudge that was Maidenpool to the southeast, and the Salt pans to the northeast.

The watchtower she would create in Harrenhal's place wouldn't be a towering monstrosity as the old Whent fortress had been; yet, any contemporary watchtower she could design in her mind instantly brought images of airport control towers or American prisons.

Inspiration hit, and with a grin, Hermione directed her wand aloft, parallel to the ground and in preparation for the hard flicks and jabs transfiguration required.

She closed her eyes. Focusing firmly on the image she wanted in her mind, from base to tower top, Hermione held the image and then began to push her magic outward, through her wand and towards the largest remaining rocks.

The grey stone shook, a slow rumble that had loose pieces break off and the men around her to stop what they were doing to watch wide-eyed. Then, the heaviest of the stones began slowly to rise in the air, its lumpy shape beginning to smooth and bubble into a new shape.

Sweat beaded on Hermione's brow, but she kept her eyes closed and her lips pressed tightly shut, her grip on her wand white-knuckled.

The stone reshaped itself, elongating, stretching, and firming into a square tower, which she placed with a jab towards the ground. The stone slammed into the earth with a heavy, dull thud that Hermione felt reverberate in her bones. She locked her knees to remain upright and opened her eyes.

In front of her was a tall, square tower. It was not nearly as large as the original Harrenhal towers, but a tall kind of sleek, with thin windows in spaced intervals. Its top was divided from the body, with two windows facing the witch and a lowered open gabled roof.

Eddard was looking at it dubiously. "We're using that as a tower?"

"Shut up." she muttered and pointed her wand at the next largest rock. She repeated the process three times in total after the first tower, creating them identical in height and design. Two were pressed closer to together in distance, while the other two mirrored them in a long and narrow rectangular.

Despite the sweat that beaded at her temples and dampened her hair at the nape of her neck, Hermione continued to work on the design she had in mind: four other rocks lengthened and smoothed to create curtain walls that connected the four towers to create an inner courtyard. Between the two towers in front of them, Hermione raised the height of the wall and then created an arched opening. The opening itself wasn't too large - just enough for two carts to pass side-by-side in a tight pinch - nor was it high. In fact, she left enough room between the top of the arch and the top of the wall between the towers to add more arrow slits.
While medieval enough in design that it could pass for something architecturally similar to other castles and keeps in Westeros, the gatehouse/watchtower's arched windows and portcullis, as well as the seamlessly integrated smooth grey stone, gave it a novelty. Two sets of the portcullis, similar to kissing gates (where those entering would have to wait for the first gate to be lowered before the second interior would raise; and, appropriately, the opposite on the other end to exit), framed the gatehouses on either end of the fort.

It was simplistic with its four towers, but the inner courtyard's narrow passage created a bottleneck point for any invading forces if they managed to enter the gate. The thickness of the curtain wall and gatehouses on either side of the fort had windows and balconies facing inward for soldiers to keep an eye on those passing below - or defend from above with their bows.

For all purposes, it was similar enough to a square keep castle, but without the interior keep; the wall here was meant to usher people through, not collect, and contain people in buildings. Hermione would later add stables, bedchambers, a kitchen, a mess hall, and offices within the walls of the fort and towers, but after she finished the other watchtowers.

Panting through her open mouth, Hermione let herself slump a bit as she dropped her wand arm. She was awake, and standing, which was an improvement over her previous spellcasting in the past, but she was shaky and had the beginning of a headache.

Eddard walked up the edge of the fort, running his hand down the stone. Unlike Riverrun or other stone-built castles in Westeros, the fort Hermione designed locked the stones together by fusing them with magic into one solid piece of stone - like a large quarry cut of granite. The Karstark tilted his head back and let out a long, low whistle of awe.

"Are they all going to look like this?"

Hermione nodded her head slowly. "I think so. I like this design - I saw pictures of the Germanic Limes made by the Romans and borrowed the idea. Since the Limes was a border defense of over nine hundred forts and auxiliary towers spanning a large distance - quite like what we're doing here - I thought it was appropriate."

Maege turned her sharp eyes toward Hermione. The woman's thick, wiry greying hair, ruddy cheeks, and round face gave Hermione the impression that Maege Mormont could be a family member of Pomona Sprout - the Head of Hufflepuff - who shared similar physical qualities but when she looked at Hermione like that…

Hermione shivered. The house of badgers was known for their loyalty and hard work; never did she feel so stripped when they looked at her as Maege Mormont was. She and her daughter had the piercing eyes perfected.

"So there is something similar in your world?"

Hermione nodded slowly. "Was."

"Was?" Maege's cool tone dropped a few degrees further.

"Time happens; civilizations come and go," replied Hermione, her answers glib, but truthfully. "Technology in my world advanced away from swords and shields. We have other ways to protect borders."

And most of them are invasive, she finished silently. But how could someone explain cameras on every street corner or privacy laws? The most Westeros had was someone reading their mail but a
clever encryption could stop that.

Maege hummed in response, turning back to face the new structure. She, along with Eddard and Dacey and one or two of the other soldiers, decided to walk the interior, seeing if it was as sound from the inside as the exterior, leaving Hermione to recuperate.

She sat on a free boulder, tipping her head back to relax in the noon sun as it weakly filtered through thin, wispy clouds.

"You need to eat," chided Torrhen as he sat next to her, handing a small bowl filled with porridge of some kind. "I know the Portkey will take us back to Riverrun, but the King will have my head if he thinks you're neglecting your health."

"You're just a mother hen, Torrhen," grinned Hermione, but she took the bowl and began to hurriedly scoop the goop onto a spoon and then her mouth. Even after a few bites, she felt her shakes subside and her energy return.

By the time she was done the small meal, the others returned from inspecting the new fort. Maege spoke to her first. "It's well made, from something magically constructed."

"Thank you."

"The rest will be identical?" she confirmed again.

Hermione nodded.

"Then I see no problem with the plan," she said decisively, her tone authoritative. "The others asked me here to watch and report back, and I can do so now with confidence."

Hermione did her best not to roll her eyes. She could be Merlin reincarnated into Westeros for all that mattered, and there would be those who still questioned her abilities or motives. Instead, she stood from the boulder, wiping her hands on the front of her jeans and said, "Well, we're done here for today. No one decided whose blood would be used for this fort since the Whent line is all but gone. Let's return and we'll move on to Goodbrooke tomorrow, heading westerly, since that borders the Westerlands and the Lannisters."

There were noises of agreement, with Torrhen offering their Portkey back to Riverrun - a Karstark shield - for everyone to touch. They were then whisked away, back to their headquarters; Hermione would end up with Torrhen, practicing their combat, while Dacey met with Arya and then they would be in meetings with Robb and the other lords while Maege reported back on Hermione's success of the day.

Rinse and repeat for tomorrow; and it was such for a following three weeks, as Hermione and the same group moved slowly along the western border of the Riverlands. What initially took a solid five hours of spellcasting in the morning, Hermione managed to improve down to three by the time they reached the eighth fort - Mallister's - a few weeks later. They had one more to do north of them, Erenford, before returning to Harrenhal's original site and to being moving easterly.

The Mallister seat - Seaguard - was quite beautiful. The area wasn't necessarily rocky or mountainous, or peppered with gently rolling hills; instead, a massive castle branched out across several jutting islands, supported by large bridges. There was height to the castle, overlooking a bustling seatown nestled along Ironman's Bay. The castle was protected by the woodsy Cape of Eagles to the north, and after speaking to Lord Jason Mallister about it, what would be their fort further down. The entire Seaguard town would be bracketed by the two structures, and after further
discussion, Hermione suggested adding an underground passage between the two (despite it adding several days onto their projected timeline).

The problem with the busy port was that there was no way to timely process the coming and going of people - especially foreigners - and documents them all with the current Westerosi standards. Placing the Mallister fort towards the south of the town encouraged anyone leaving on foot to travel through the fort, but Seaguard was still vulnerable to a sea attack. It was something she hadn't foreseen when initially planning the defense line, and it was leaving her scratching her head.

Eventually, with some discussion via her mirror, Jason Mallister agreed to return to Seaguard with her to be there in person, leaving his son Patrek behind to represent him at Robb's court. And Apparation jump back later, Jason Mallister was heaving his lunch in a manner more befitting a new sailor who hadn't gained his sea legs yet.

"It'll pass," said Hermione sympathetically.

He recovered moments later, despite a pale face, and stood to his full height as regally as he could - like none of the group had seen him vomiting a mere minute ago.

"It's highly unpleasant," he said in response, but then quickly took stock of the new fort Hermione erected south of Seaguard, his eyes spanning the port and then resting on his home. They had the element of some height by being further away, but several curious Mallister guards who came to investigate after small folk reported a structure being built, were also watching them.

"My Lord," one called in greeting, startled by the loud pop Hermione and Mallister's arrival made. His eyes were wide but he recovered and bowed to his liege. "What is - what is this?"

Mallister waved a hand. "Further protections for Seaguard, Brynn," said Mallister. "The Lady Hermione and I are discussing how to protect the port without destroying our trade."

Brynn, the soldier, cast a wary glance towards Hermione but nodded. "Yes, my Lord."

Hermione and Mallister then turned back towards the port, Hermione twirling a piece of hair around a finger thoughtfully, the other wrapped around her stomach. Beside her, Mallister was frowning. "I can really only see one option."

"Oh?"

"Build a seawall," he said with a sigh, "But that will limit what ships come in and what goes out when. It also busies up the docks and using the name collection to allow passage would take hours if not days."

"What if it was further out?" asked Hermione, eyes cast further out, to the mouth of the bay. "Spanning across - say - those two points?" She pointed at a protruding cliff face from the Cape of Eagles and then swept her arm southward to near them, where, in the distance, she could see another small inlet and grassy beach dunes.

"We can move the fort to that end instead, by the dunes. We'll build a seawall - or, tidal wall, I suppose - to span a portion of Ironman's Bay instead. It'll be more work, and I'd want to embed the stone deep into the seafloor, but we can make the gates large enough for ships to pass through - one gate in, one gate out. You won't use the names the same way here, but we can devise a different plan to close the gates with the ward."

Mallister nodded thoughtfully. "Yes - yes, that might work. The fort would be closer to the mountains and Lord Blackwood's fort. It would make it easier to connect the two." He turned to face
her, looking down with curious eyes. "How long would it take?"

Hermione sighed. "Definitely more than today."

Maege reported back with the parchments their snag in planning, and then Hermione said a mental goodbye to a relaxed afternoon - as much as one could relax while sparring with Torrhen Karstark - and shucked her jacket despite the much colder weather further north.

Concentrating, she undid the transfiguration on the completed fort. Each tower at the four corners melted down back into the original boulder from Harrenhal until only they and a series of smaller stones that made up each of the walls of the fort remained. Eddard and Daryn helpfully went to collect the smaller stones to fetch for her, while Hermione shrank the boulders and accio'd them right into her "fort" bag.

"Incredible," breathed Mallister, eyes wide.

"You think that was something?" muttered Torrhen, cutting his eyes towards the man. "Watch her put the damn thing up."

Despite feeling the drain on her magic, Hermione did just so; the spot they had chosen to overlook Seaguard meant that she could see the dunes to the south just as easily, and sending the stones Eddard and Daryn were collecting there was easy to do. The boulders would take a bit more time (from unshrinking them and then placing them and then transfiguring them), but the wait was worth it.

Hermione broke her best time of three hours by shaving off thirty minutes in putting the fort back up; but she made changes, turning one of the towers into a lighthouse with an open brazier at the top. The actual tide wall and tunnel - which Mallister still wanted - would take longer.

Three days later and very behind schedule, Seaguard had a new tidal wall that spanned a portion of Ironman's Bay and only Mallister's chosen household staff knew of the tunnel that linked Seaguard with what they were calling the Eagle's Nest.

The tying of the blood to the ward was simple; a few drops of Mallister's blood - ensuring his bloodline was tied to the fort - and Hermione leading him through the Latin-based spell in the Black family library book she had - er, borrowed - before her return to Hogwarts. There was a sizzle as the blood heated on the ward stone located underground and inside the fort, and then, on a gemino copy of a master map of the Riverlands that Robb had in his war room, Eagle's Nest appeared.

Hermione had taken the idea of the Marauder's Map and fashioned her own version for the ward. It didn't monitor every single person within the border the way the Map did, but it did show the watchtowers as they "turned on." So far, the entire western border of the Riverlands and the bottom southern half on the western side was lit with a silver line connecting them, the ward already in place.

Wishing to regain some of their lost time, Hermione had everyone Portkey back to Harrenhal to begin their eastern leg of the defensive line that evening, after she pushed forward and finished Erenford just after the evening meal.

Back in the south, where the air was considerably warmer, Daryn and Eddard made camp while several others set a patrol. Dacey was going through a series of moves with her blades, keeping her skills, while a group of the Umber soldiers watched, calling out at her and trying to make her break her concentration - and of course, failing.
Hermione sat propped up against a remaining wall of Harrenhal's - similar to the one she, Torrhen and Dacey had crept along when they rescued Brienne and recaptured Jaime Lannister. Torrhen sat on the wall, using a whetstone to sharpen his blade calmly, and Maege sat across from her, the fire between them.

"Lady Mormont," said Hermione, drawing her attention, "If I can ask - you don't ever seem to question my magic. Why is that?"

"The peoples of Westeros have their own kind of magic, Lady Hermione," answered the older woman with a wry look on her face. "The First Men who came to Westeros thousands of year ago had a touch of magic - in their greenseers, wargs, and grumkins. Your kind of magic is just a different branch of the tree."

"If magic is that common in Westeros, why aren't more aware of what I can do?" asked Hermione, confusion in her tone. "Everyone acts like I'm a novelty."

Torrhen snorted from Hermione's side. "You are a novelty." Before she could open her mouth and ask how or why, Torrhen continued: "Magic the likes of which you do - with your wand - is unknown or unheard of by us in Westeros. Or, I'd imagine, elsewhere."

Maege was nodding. "Magic by blood, yes; magic by wand? No."

"What kind of magic by blood exists here then?" asked Hermione curiously, drawing her knees up to loop her arms around them comfortably as she rested her cheek on her bony knee.


Hermione shivered. She licked her lips nervously and muttered, "I'm not like that."

"Of course you aren't," replied Torrhen, indignant on her behalf.

"Others think so," pointed out Maege, in a tone as if she was describing the night as dark - it was dry and pointed.

"Like who?" demanded Torrhen.

"Lady Stark," muttered Hermione lowly. "I know she doesn't like me. And Lord Glover. Black Walder and I dislike each other-"

Maege laughed, loudly. "Well, that's more to do with your-" she paused, thinking of the right word "-friendship with the King, Witch."

Her laughter drew the attention of others, and slowly the fire gained more attendants other than the patrol who kept their eyes on the darkness around them. The older woman sighed and poked at the fire with a stick, making it pop.

"As for Lady Stark…" the woman glanced away before speaking. "She has her reasons to mistrust anything odd, Lady Hermione. She's a southern woman, and southern folk don't know what it's like to grow up in the North."

"But she's lived in the North for years," countered Hermione in confusion, "She married into it and bore several children that she raised Northern. That should be long enough to absorb the culture and traditions."
Maege shrugged. "Can be. But Southron ways are rightly strange, with their worship and the lack of their belief of anything other than their Seven gods."

Hermione sighed. "Like magic."

"Like wargs," countered Maege, her eyes glittering from across the fire as they bore into Hermione's. "Like grumkins, wargs, and woods witches and things beyond the wall."

A chilly breeze pushed by them, and the fire flickered, drawing the attention of everyone sitting around the camp. Silence descended and someone, one of the Umbers, uttered a swear under their breath that was half-prayer.

Unconsciously, Hermione found herself inching towards the comfort of Torrhen's presence. When she was eleven, the idea of magic to a Muggleborn was amazing as everything and anything she had read in a fantasy novel, and Hogwarts delivered. However, as she got older, she saw much more of the darkness in the wizarding world - from necromancy to Horcruxes, and racial prejudice and slavery - but the magic in Westeros was something she was not familiar with, or prepared for.

"What are -" she stumbled over the unfamiliar name, a burning jealousy of not knowing something burning through her. "What are grumkins? And wargs?"

Eddard, who grinned at Hermione as he sat with a heavy thump on the hardened earth at Torrhen's feet, still carefully away from the blade. "Grumkins are mythical creatures that grant wishes!:"

Daryn, who had been setting up camp with Eddard, sighed and shook his head, turning to face Hermione and explained in further detail, "They grant wishes by either crafting magical objects which make wishes come true, or by directly giving people a number of wishes. Legend states that the third wish is the last and must be used carefully."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Like a genie!"

"Are your genies small and short in statue and steal children too?" grinned Eddard, bearing his teeth and enjoying the startled look on Hermione's face as he antagonized her.

"Er, no," responded a disturbed Hermione. Not quite like a genie then. Where do the similarities and differences between our worlds meet and end?

"And wargs?" she asked instead before the silence became too awkward.

"Skinchangers," said Maege. "Folk who can turn into animals."

"Oh! We have that too," she said, grateful that this one wasn't nearly as bad as the others. "We call them animagus - people who turn into their animal form."

Daryn shook his head, his hair flopping a bit as he did so. "No, Lady Hermione. Wargs can turn into any animal, so the legends say. But I think it's more that they bond with an animal and they share a mind."

"A shared consciousness?...?" murmured Hermione, thinking back to when Robb became angry with his men and Grey Wind's terrifying howl that burst through the night; at the strange liquid-like sensation the King's eyes turned as his emotions grew in strength.

Small, low conversations broke through the group as people eased off into pairs or tasks, leaving Torrhen to finish his task and Hermione to herself. She found herself staring off into the distance, south, towards King's Landing as her thoughts turned.
Does Catelyn see me as a threat then? Because she doesn't know what I'm capable of and because I've defied her or Robb in the past? she wondered with a frown. Surely she knows I'd rather crucio myself than harm a Stark! They're my friends. My abilities are nothing compared to the rumours and stories of the North and the magic of the First Men - their abilities and strengths are so different to mine!

Her fingers itched to pull out her mirror and speak to her friend - to hear Robb's voice and discuss this revelation and see if he agreed or not; but instead, she was torn from her thoughts by something else.

The southern horizon was awash with a green tinge.

It was eerie and unnatural, and not even Hermione's wards of silver light would mimic the sickly colour that painted the night's sky. It was similar to the colour of the Killing Curse, and it was enough that Hermione stood, eyes wide.

"Hermione…?" Torrhen's voice trailed off as he watched his friend stand rigidly on the wall next to him, eyes focused on something in the distance. He, too, turned and saw the strange colour that tinged the sky.

Others, noticing their attention, began to trail off in their conversations to look towards the south, wondering what captured Hermione's attention.

"By the Gods," breathed a horrified older soldier of the Karstarks that had joined them. "Wildfire."

"That's wildfire?" asked Eddard, his voice carrying.

The same older soldier nodded.

"What's wildfire?" asked Hermione, her voice low in respect of the horror that rippled off those around her.

"Liquid that is so dangerous and volatile that a single mistake could destroy entire villages in seconds," answered a grim Maege. "Only the Pyromancers know how to create it, and when it burns, it does so uncontrollably and water cannot stop it."

Hermione shivered. It sounded like a terrible mix of fiendfyre and Greek Fire.

"That hangs over King's Landing," said a quiet Daryn, whose observation cut through the group. "King's Landing is burning."

And for the sake of Catelyn's mental state, and Robb and Arya, Hermione hoped that Sansa was safe.

The wildfire burned long into the night, even as the sun rose the following morning; Hermione and those with her had to continue in their plans to head east to complete the seven remaining forts - a solid week of work considering Lord Mooton's seat was on the Bay of Crabs and would want a fort similar to Lord Mallister's. There was no time to think or worry about what occurred south of them, especially if there was nothing they could immediately do.

Hermione was finishing Lord Haigh's fort at the base of the Mountains of the Moon, which loomed behind them, blue and imposing, six days later when they received news about King's Landing. Dacey and Eddard had great fun in telling Hermione all about the Mountain Clans and their ferocious attacks on people they thought trespassed on their land, making the young woman glance
over her shoulder at the forested base of the mountain between casting her spells.

Her nerves were already wrought when Robb called her on the mirror, but she stepped away from the group while remaining in Torrhen's watchful sight. She cast a *muffliato* at the same time to ensure privacy.

"Stannis Baratheon launched an attack on King's Landing several days ago," were the first words from his mirror-self. He hadn't shaved or trimmed his beard, so he appeared rather scraggy and there were bags under his eyes. "We haven't heard much, but from what we do understand, the Lannisters in the capital were able to defeat him. Barely."

"What about your sister?" asked Hermione carefully. "Did you get ahold of her?"

Robb's face shuttered. "She's not answering. I have no idea if she even has the mirror."

Hermione's heath dropped to reside in her stomach. "I'm sorry, Robb."

He shook his head. "Nothing you did, Hermione. Besides - what reports we have is that the Old Lion's attacks on us previously in the Riverlands - the battle you engaged him in first outside Riverrun, and then when you and Lord Bolton retook Harrenhal - seems to have cut his numbers. The Mountain never came to King's Landing, so he must still be in the Riverlands somewhere. By not having much of call upon, as we had destroyed parts of his army, Tywin Lannister didn't have as much of a force as planned to engage with Stannis."

"We saw the wildfire on the horizon though," said Hermione quietly, "I'm sure that tipped the favour…"

Robb nodded grimly. "To the Lannister's, it did. Stannis' fleet was all but destroyed. He did escape, as did several other ships, but most were burned by the wildfire or ripped apart. His foot soldiers didn't quite penetrate the walls, either."

"It was bad?" confirmed Hermione.

Robb nodded. "It was bad."

The two were silent as they pondered what the attack on King's Landing would mean for Robb and his army. To Hermione, it meant that the Lannisters kept their hold on the capital and the largest population center, as well as in essence controlled a propaganda machine by virtue of being the resting place for the King of Westeros. Stannis Baratheon's defeat meant that his position as second to Robert Baratheon - as the next in line to the throne - failed, not just because of his personality (as she had heard), but because he lacked the military prowess to claim King's Landing as well.

*Where will you go next, Stannis?* she wondered.

"How many more forts do you have to complete?" asked Robb suddenly, cutting into Hermione's thoughts.

"One," she replied instantly. "As the Freys declined any help from my end. They've supplied their blood though, through Black Walder."

"So once you're done the next, the ward will be up?"

"It's already up," confirmed Hermione. "I'm just tying the remaining forts into it. The blood sacrifice is about intent with the blood ritual really as a means to reinforce the idea of what the ward stands for; since everyone wanted to the protection of the ward, their blood sacrifice was strong, and their
intentions tied to the forts quickly."

"Excellent," replied Robb, some of the tension in his face bleeding away. "Return to Riverrun immediately. Don't linger in the Riverlands - I'd feel better knowing you are - er, and the others, that is - are back here safe."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at the King's near slip but nodded. "See you soon," she said, and then, "finite."

She stored the mirror away in her beaded bag and turned back to the final additions on the Haigh fort. If they were lucky and pressed, they could even finish the Vypren fort that evening and back in their featherbeds before midnight.

"Alright everyone!" called Hermione, catching their attention and she returned to the group, dropping the muffilato as well. "We have a change in plans - who wants to be back at Riverrun tonight?"

There was no time to rest when they returned; the ward was a visible, shimmering reminder on the map that hung in Riverrun's war room. It guaranteed that Robb's plan could continue forward with the protection of the Riverlands secured. There was no time to test the ward, so everyone was waiting on tenterhooks to see which fort would be used first and the inevitable complaints that would come via raven from others in Westeros.

In the meantime, Riverrun was a hive of activity as Robb continued to press them to return North, to liberate Winterfell. What food that could be spared was placed aside, and then Hermione would cast an enlarging charm on some loaves of bread, or on a pile of vegetables, as well as a gemino to ease the burden with winter approaching. She did this in between casting her portkey charms on the pins, a little over halfway complete.

To her, however, she felt guilt at being unable to dedicate more time to the food stores; but she had to prioritize her time and spells. There was only one of her in Riverrun and more for her to do than possible.

A month later, Robb had called a full meeting, and the Riverlands and Northern lords were once more around the table in his war room.

"The pace will be brutal and long," he announced after several others had finished their reports on their troops, the food, their weapons, and any information on their enemies. "Autumn may have much of Westeros in her grip, but we know that we are marching towards Winter. And Winter is Coming."

There was a roar of approval by the Northern lords and some Riverlands lords at Robb's words. His lips stretched into a tiny, pleased smile as he surveyed them all.

"We are looking at, at least a moon's length for the journey between here and the Twins, where Lord Frey has graciously allowed us to rest," continued Robb. "We will be there for several weeks, conducting what I've been told is a 'summit.' All Riverlands lords and Northern lords are encouraged to join us on the journey; those of you who are Riverlands lords, however, know that you have done your duty to your king and land, defending it from Lannisters and other unsavoury bastards who wish to do you and yours harm. With the ward now protecting the Riverlands, we only just have to smoke out the wily bastards of the Old Lion and end them."

It was time for the Riverlands lords to cheer loudly.
"I will not order you to march North with me, my friends," the young King's smile had dropped and now he was solemn as he stopped and rested his eyes on those who were in the room with him. "It will be your choice should you wish to come north. But I promise to those of you who do - you will find glory, and you will find Ironborn squids to stick your swords into! I have protected your home, now I ask you to join me North to protect mine."

There was not a single voice that did not loudly proclaim their desire to join their King. Their voices shook the wooden beams above and the fire in the large hearth behind Robb shifted and flickered as the air around it was displaced.

At his side, Hermione beamed up at him, in pride, and he glanced down at her, flushed with success. He had fought battles, and won them; he had her help in protecting the Riverlands, and kept the allegiance of his men. Little could go wrong for them.

Robb had to raise both his hands to quiet the room, but it took time. Once the cheers died down, he spoke loudly so that his voice carried, but ensured his tone was pleasant. "The summit at the Twins will be to discuss our battle plans for Winterfell and the liberation of the western coast where Ironborn are raiding. The eastern coast must remain vigilant for the remains of Stannis' fleet, but our focus will be the west and inwards, readying ourselves for winter.

"Furthermore," he raised his voice over some murmurs, "This summit will provide me with the opportunity to hand out long-overdue recognition for those in my service, for their part in a battle, their military strength, and their continued loyalty."

"And what of a wedding?" shouted Black Walder from the back of the room. "Will that occur as well, given that His Grace is engaged to one of my kin?"

There was some embarrassed tittering by those, many shifting uncomfortably in their seats. It was an open secret where Robb's affection lay, even if neither he nor Hermione had ever done anything to encourage it or spoke about it.

Robb flinched at the reminder but gamely spoke, even if his mouth trembled a bit as he did so: "I would hope that I could bring my new wife to Winterfell when it was free of any dangers. There's no point offering my bride a ruined home, or the uncertainty of travelling from battle to battle - or even the insult of doing so, like a common camp whore."

There was a stunned silence, but it settled some of Black Walder's grumbles, even if he was not appreciative of the response. "Very well. But, soon."

Robb nodded his head, slowly.

"Soon," he agreed, although the word tasted like ashes in his mouth. He kept his head forward and refused to glance to the side where he knew Hermione sat. He cleared his throat. "I ask that those Riverlands lords who will be joining us to the Twins and on to Winterfell inform Lord Umber, Lord Karstark, or Lady Mormont at your earliest convenience." When no one spoke, he finished the meeting with, "We leave in a weeks' time, at dawn."

Robb was instantly swarmed with people wishing to speak to him, leaving Hermione to just watch. However, she was not alone long, as Bracken slipped up from his seat - nearly ten down from where she sat at the head with Robb - to join her.

"I assume our quick retreat from Riverrun is partially your doing?" he asked, his mouth twitching into a smile.
Hermione nodded. "I've almost got all the pins Robb wanted to be done, complete. Within the next two days, I should have the rest if I'm working on them exclusively, and we both decided that wasting any more time is silly."

"Oh?"

Hermione's gaze turned back to the young King, who was listening with a serious expression on his face as a Norrey and Ironsmith were speaking to him. The clan and lesser house could only support Robb with a few soldiers, but their loyalty was absolute, and the Young Wolf knew it.

"He misses the North," she said quietly, turning back to Bracken. "He wants to go home. See who is left and what Theon did to Winterfell." *And continue to track Bran and Rickon.*

Bracken nodded. "I can see the importance in that." He sighed. "Well, I don't think I've ever seen the North in winter, so it'll be a first for me."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "You'll be going North?"

The look Bracken gave her made her feel two feet tall. "Aye. My nephew Hendry and my son Harry will maintain Stone Hedge for me while I continue to serve King Robb and the royal family."

The returning look Hermione sent him was one of confusion mixed with suspicion. As far as she knew, Bracken had little to no interaction with Catelyn Stark - the Queen Regent with Robb's ascension to King in the North - or with Arya, who was by all rights now a Princess. So what member of the royal family was he talking about? *Edmure?*

"And," he continued, speaking over anything Hermione would ask for clarification, "I know that Tytos will be doing the same."

"Well, he makes a bit more sense," said Hermione slowly, trying to not offend, "Given that his eldest remains at Raventree Hall and Lucas is part of Robb's guard. He still has three other sons in his family seat."

"Two," the man himself announced as he strode up to her and Bracken, "As I've written for Hos to join us on the way." He turned to Hermione directly. "If you may remember, Lady Hermione, Hoster was the one who helped us lay our grievances to join as allies. Hos is a bit bookish, but I figure he might be able to help you in your pursuit of discovering texts on magic."

Hermione was taken aback by the suggestion. "Lord Blackwood-! That's very kind of you. Thank you. I'd welcome his help."

"Excellent," the tall, black-haired man grinned. It was sharp and predatory as he cut his eyes at Bracken, who was visibly annoyed. "Closer ties between House Blackwood and yourself are always a good idea."

"Excellent," the tall, black-haired man grinned. It was sharp and predatory as he cut his eyes at Bracken, who was visibly annoyed. "Closer ties between House Blackwood and yourself are always a good idea."

*Oh, so that's what this is about,* thought Hermione with a roll of her eyes.

Bracken's response was nearly a snarl. "I'm sure that Lady Hermione would welcome some more company of the female persuasion. Perhaps I will write Barbara and ask her to join. I'm sure she and Lady Hermione would like to reacquaint themselves. Barbara spoke highly of her before we left."

Hermione let out a loud huff as the two men continued to size each other up, deciding to leave them to their posturing. *Honestly. Men!*

It appeared that despite burying the hatchet, so to speak, the two men were eager to continue feuds
wherever possible.

*At least it's with words to rile each other up and not swords,* she thought with a final shrug.

Instead of taking the River Road east to the Inn at the Crossroads, and then taking the King's Road north, Robb decided to cut across the countryside to cut their travel time down considerably. They began their journey to Winterfell via the Twins a week later by heading directly north from Riverrun by crossing the Red Fork.

Robb rode on the back of his horse, Grey Wind at his side as they led the procession. The entire Northern army was joining them to retake their home, but several Riverlands lords had joined as well. Some soldiers were only token amounts, like Lyman Darry who was barely a tween and could spare little men. Others, like Bracken and Blackwood, left only token amounts at their keeps instead. However, the Northern lords well outnumbered the Riverlands lords regardless.

Arya was infuriated to hear she was staying behind at Riverrun with Edmure watching over her as her guardian while Catelyn joined Robb to the Twins. Brienne would remain behind as Arya's protector (and, under Robb's orders, to continue giving her swordplay lessons); even Jaime Lannister would remain behind, secure in his warded room by Hermione's magic.

Hermione rode behind Torrhen on a shared steed, surrounded by those she considered friends in Westeros: the Karstarks (both Rickard and his son Eddard), Bracken and Blackwood, and Lord Bolton. Just in front of her small group was Robb, with Catelyn at his side, surrounded by his guard (of Dacey, Lucas, Daryn, and Patrek), and Maege Mormont, the Greatjon and Smalljon Umber, and Black Walder Frey.

The rest of the Northern lords and Riverlands lords joining them were scattered up and down the line. Hermione had spent the morning spelling carts laden with food and supplies with featherlight charms for the horses and then said goodbye to Gendry for his help with the pins - the last of which she had finished the night before, except for some detachment of Mormont, Darry, and Forrester men.

("Why not?" she asked Robb, over dinner as they remained in his war room the night before they left, his eyes downcast and focused on making notations in a ledger.

"I want to send them around the Twins," he answered.

"Around?" gapped Hermione. "Are they not coming with us? Do you suspect something is wrong with the Twins?"

Robb shook his head, looking up. "No. It's a mere precaution. I'll send them around towards Graywater March, to meet with Lord Howland Reed instead. I'm thinking of splitting the army into two then, to meet up at Moat Cailin from two different sides to attack it."

Hermione pensively nodded. "You're not putting all your eggs in one basket."

The stupefied look on Robb's face made her laugh, loudly. "I - what? Hermione - what?")

The first leg of the journey was short and the weather was clear with sunny, if not chilled, skies. The mountainous terrain near Riverrun alongside the banked Red Fork River quickly turned to lush, fertile fields. The head of the procession passed farmers and small villages preparing for harvests, finally free of being tormented by several large warring armies. They'd cheer at recognizing the Stark banners proudly displayed alongside many familiar Riverlands ones as they rode by until they reached Fairmarket.
While there were clear and sunny skies for them, it seemed that Fairmarket had a recent downpour. The majority of the army remained far from the town, camped out on muddy fields that made everyone miserable. Robb gathered his mother, his guard, as well as several natural leaders he preferred to join him in the town, where at a local inn, they met with the innkeeper.

"I'm sorry, milord," the man apologized, "But the heavy rains we had the last few days swept the bridge right away!"

"How large was the bridge?" asked Umber.

The innkeeper shrugged. "No more than a cart's span, milord. And it was old - very old. I doubt it would've held your army's crossing."

Robb grit his teeth and turned to Hermione. "Hermione? Do you think you could…?"

"What? Fix it? Reinforce it?" she replied, a bit snappish. It was the longest she'd been on a horse in Westeros, and she was not appreciating the fact that she was off the ground for any longer than necessary. She would've preferred Apparating the distance in short bursts, but Robb worried about her safety and forbade it. (She still could've done it, but whether it was going to be worth the anger her friend carried, well - she didn't care much for that.)

"Any," replied Robb.

Hermione shrugged. "I'd have to see what there is to work with."

Nothing, as it turned out. When the innkeeper said it was swept away, he meant all of it. There were no supplies left for Hermione to use magic to rebuild the bridge unless some of Robb's army wanted to become lumberjacks for a few days.

When Hermione returned to the inn with the news, Robb's frown deepened. It was practically a scowl when the Blackfish swore and brought the latest news from King's Landing to those in the inn via their parchments.

Oh, what now? thought Hermione crossly.

"Edmure writes," the man began, his voice trembling with barely controlled rage. "Ravens have been sent to all of the great Houses in Westeros. It seems that there was a wedding in King's Landing after the Lannisters drove back Stannis!"

"The inbred twit married his Rose?" asked Karstark with a jeer.

The Blackfish shook his head. "A wolf to a lion!"

The room grew dangerously silent. At his side, Catelyn paled and swayed, her hands reaching behind to grab onto the back of a chair.

"What?" the word that escaped Robb's lip was a low rumble, half a growl.

"Tyrion Lannister wed Princess Sansa," confirmed the Blackfish, his hands holding the parchment shaking. "The ceremony was at least a week ago, now."

There was a sense of stunned disbelief through the group. Hermione, who didn't know Sansa well or at all - having only heard about her through Robb, Arya, and any Stark bannermen who came from Winterfell - did wonder about the reaction. Yes, it was bad; Sansa was essentially a teen girl surrounded by enemies. Marriage was meant as a tie to her new family - but in Westeros, things
could easily change and her new husband could easily die in battle.

Hermione's bigger concern was that Tyrion Lannister was clearly Jaime Lannister's family, and she was worried that he had a similar personality, and would take it out on the teen.

"This may - umm," began Glover, finding his voice and making himself heard in the room, "This may be the best time for you to write your will and define the laws of succession, Your Grace."

"Ou think now is the best time?" snapped Catelyn, turning to the man. "You are not thinking clearly, my Lord. My girl is in the bosom of the enemy! We need to figure out a way to get her back!"

The number of disbelieving stares that were sent Catelyn's way echoed the very thoughts that Hermione shared about the situation. "Eddard, Dacey, please escort my mother out, would you?"

"Robb-!"

The two guards, with half-embarrassed, half-stoic expressions on their faces did as their King bid, leading a protesting Catelyn from the inn's downstairs to the room she was assigned upstairs. Once she was gone from view, Robb sighed heavily.

"I will not be trading the Kingslayer for my sister," said Robb quietly. "There are other plans in motion for her retrieval. The laws of succession are clear; Sansa, married to a Lannister, will never inherit Winterfell or the title of a Queen of Winter."

"Prince Bran would be the next," offered Karstark quietly.

"Both my brothers are missing," said Robb, glancing around the room."While we know they are alive, we do not have the time to find them and bring them back to Winterfell. Arya remains the only other Stark free and safe."

"Princess Arya, Your Grace, certainly has the viciousness to be Queen in the North," began Umber with a tentative smile that had several standing in the room chuckle, as they all knew of Arya's temperament, "But she is barely ten and four years and has no practical experience in leading."

"Then Jon," sighed Robb. "He's the same age as I and has had the same training. He'll leave the Night's Watch."

"Forsake his oaths?" Bolton's mouth turned down at the suggestion. "The Stark name is built on oaths and honour, Your Grace. Having Snow take up your mantle as King in the North while indisposed is certainly acceptable but not as an alternative."

Robb spun and snapped at his men, "Then what would you have me do, Bolton? If all my siblings fail to meet your expectations, what solution is there?"

"Marry," said Black Walder in a straightforward manner, as if he was announcing the sky was blue, winter was cold. "We are visiting my father's home within a fortnight. The terms of your alliance with the Freys are marriage. Pick one of my kin and marry the chit."

Rob's flushed cheeks drained of colour quickly, leaving him the colour of sour milk. He turned his back on his men in the room, staring towards the stairs, making it so that none saw his face. He took several deep breaths and Hermione's heart ached. Eventually, he turned, his face expressionless. "My Lords, prepare parchment. I will write out my will and send several copies out to you in case of capture."
The terms were written out in Karstark's hand, as he had the nicest writing, and witnessed by those in the room: Maege Mormont, the Greatjon Umber, Roose Bolton, Black Walder, Galbert and his son Robett Glover, and Hermione. When Robb signed his name at the bottom of the last of the three documents, Grey Wind, who had been left outside, howled.

Several jumped at the unexpected noise, but Hermione was looking directly at the Young Wolf, and saw his blue eyes flash - a strange silver tinge to them - and then Grey Wind stopped howling and his eyes were normal.

"Lady Mormont," said Robb, his voice tight, and emotionless.

"Your Grace," replied the Lady of Bear Island.

Robb turned to look at her. "Take the two other Lords you've chosen with you and head North, like we previously discussed. Take one copy of the will with you, as well."

"Now, Your Grace?" the woman looked startled.

Robb nodded. "Now. You have your orders - depart immediately."

"Where's she going?" muttered Umber. Hermione leaned forward and shushed him gently, although it was too quiet for the man to hear.

"As for the rest of us," continued Robb in the same dead tone, "We will rest here tonight and in the morning, and head along the Green Fork until we find some trees to fell. Hermione," he called her name, and she turned to face him, "Will you be able to use your magic and create a bridge for us to cross on the east side of the Twins?"

"With enough lumber, yes," she confirmed, her voice low.

Robb nodded at her confirmation, and then swept from the room, up the stairs with Daryn and Lucas following him. The rest of the group milled around for a moment or two - some, like Black Walder, glaring at everyone - and then they broke away, either to tables for a meal, or, like Hermione, upstairs for sleep.

Although, she was sure that like many others, including Robb, she didn't sleep that evening, as her own thoughts of what awaited them at the Twins kept her up.

They ended up riding through four days straight of an icy downpour, and two more spent in freezing rain while the army cut down trees and Hermione used her magic to help build a bridge for them to cross on day seven. The rain and the cold conditions kept the soldiers from working a peak performance, and even Hermione was having difficulty and she had her magic to keep her warm or to repel rain from her jacket!

Hermione's warming charm on herself and Torrhen kept them comfortable when on horseback, but having to reapply it so many times meant that it was losing its potency and Hermione had lost feeling in her toes several hours ago on the eighth day. She was unsure how the others were handling the weather without a warming charm, dressed in thick furs that grew heavy when damp and leather boots that did nothing to keep the water out.

On the ninth day, they had sun for several hours until the late afternoon, just as the sun was going down. Then, a miserable drizzle began to spit down in a steady curtain, just as cold and biting as the downpour they rode through earlier. The ground was warm from the day's earlier sunlight, and the quick cold rain and cloud cover combined to create a thick, unmoving fog. The Twins appeared
ahead of the army, two large arms stretching towards the sky from a thick fog that rose several stories high, shrouding much of the surrounding area.

From the head of the army procession, Robb called for them to make camp several leagues south of the Twins along the banks of the Green Fork, which was rushing by them, thick and white with icy stormwater. The banks of the river had burst their normal levies, and although the river was banked, it was wide and menacing with the strength it rushed by them with.

There was little talk as tents were pitched and wagons unhitched from horses and oxen. Lighting a fire was going to be near impossible unless Hermione helped out with an *inflamarae* as well as a water repelling charm on the flames to keep it going all night and in the rain. As such, she and Torrhen were walking through the camp, Hermione casting her spells at pre-made campfires like she had been doing so the entire trip. Both were near the end of the procession, ready to head back when Torrhen suddenly stiffened.

"What is it?" asked Hermione, shoving her heavy, wet curls off her forehead to peer into the same dark gloom and fog he was looking towards.

"Something…" he muttered, trailing off. "Something isn't right. It's too quiet."

"Quiet?" asked an incredulous Hermione, turning back to the fog. It was too thick for her to see anything, much less the head of the procession where Robb's tent was. Behind her, the fog presented ghostly figures that moved from one camp tent to another. Other than the low murmur of noise from the camp, the prevailing sound was the thunderous rush of water.

Turning back to face forward, Hermione concentrated ahead. Torrhen's still body beside her reminded Hermione of a hunting dog, ears perked forward and poised to burst into a dash after a rabbit or fox it had sniffed out. Despite her own misgivings that anyone would want to be out in the rain and fog, Hermione trusted Torrhen's instincts.

_Homenum Revelio_ thought Hermione, her wand facing in front of her. The charm burst from her wand, casting no light, and pushed against the fog, which rippled for just a moment as the spell moved through the condensation. Then, ahead, a human body outlined in red appeared.

And then another.

And another, and another.

And then dozens until the entire fog ahead of her was lit with the red outline of humans in front of the rear of their army. Torrhen unsheathed his sword, the steel ringing as he did so. In response, an arrow burst through the fog and missed Hermione by inches, slamming into the ground behind her, between two Norrey soldiers who stared at it dumbfounded.

Hermione pointed her wand at her throat, thinking _Sonorus_, and then shouted, "ATTACK! We're under attack from the rear!"

That was the signal, as the men in the fog let out a mighty roar and the ground thundered as they raced forward. Behind her, the two Norrey soldiers leaped to their feet, their own swords in their hands and they readied themselves for battle. Up and down the line, deep in the fog, a clanging, warning bell was going off, there were shouts as the Northern, and Riverlands, army wondered where their enemy was coming from.

At the front of the attack, leading the large band of men in gold and red and chainmail, was an incredibly large man, his own sword raised high. Hermione was rooted to her spot as she realized
who the man was.

_The Mountain. Gregor Clegane. He's here!_

Her eyes widened as she realized he was rushing straight towards her, with only Torrhen between them.

TBC...
The Winter Witch

XIX

The alarm took its time to reach Robb. Initially, he was stuck at the front of the procession of the army, watching as some soldiers helped him pitching his tent. However, Grey Wind was pacing in an aggravated manner, his ears pushed back and low against his head, and long, deep growls erupted from his snout whenever he turned towards the dense fog that hid the rest of the camp.

Something seemed... off. Robb frowned as he looked around, turning this way and that. His skin was itching and Grey Wind's agitation was fueling his own.

"Your Grace?" asked someone, but Robb tuned them out, facing towards the rear of the camp. He narrowed his eyes, trying to peer through the gloom. It swirled around the men walking back and forth, carrying sacks or sitting down around blue flames that Hermione charmed.

The voice tried again. "You Grace? What is it?"

"Ssh," he muttered absently, straining his ears. Was that-? Is that a fight?

And then there was a clamor as bells began to ring, first far away and down from the rear of the army, and then up through the line as soldiers jumped to their feet, reaching for their swords. From far away, they heard Hermione's voice carry, "ATTACK! We're under attack from the rear!"

Instantly, Robb lurched forward, drawing his own sword as his guard – Daryn, Dacey, Eddard, Lucas – swarmed to form a square around him, their eyes facing outward in all directions.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, shouting. "We need to go!"

"Your Grace, please," said a very strained Dacey, "Our job is to protect you. We don't know who or where the enemy is in this fog."

Robb's temper swirled and grew from the pit of his stomach, a physical thing that ran up his spine and made the hairs at the nape of his neck rise. Grey Wind snarled, and saliva dripped from between his teeth and down his jaw; Eddard shuddered.
Robb grit his teeth, and turned, spotting Lord Ryger nearby. Eyes flashing, he snapped, "Ryger! Find my mother and escort her along with a dozen men straight to the Twins!"

The man startled but nodded hastily. "Yes, of course, Your Grace."

He immediately turned on his heel and strode off, barking his own orders to men he saw, grabbing one or two by the arm as they tried to rush by him. Robb turned away from the man, mollified that he would at least follow his orders, and then glared balefully around at his guard.

"Keep up, would you?" he snapped at them, and strode towards the rear of the camp, dodging between rushing soldiers and shouting Riverlords, all the while with his guard dogging his steps. Grey Wind kept pace, loping around and streaking past men and around tents until he suddenly paused, nose in the air.

Robb's blood turned to ice when Grey Wind threw his head back and *howled.*

In those brief seconds, before Clegane reached her, Hermione thought of only three things: the first being: *Don't let this turn into a repeat of your first year at Hogwarts, Hermione – there's no Harry or Ron to save you from the mountain troll this time!* The second was: *Good God, this man is huge!* And the third: *MOVE YOUR ARSE, GRANGER!*

Hermione launched herself sideways, towards Torrhen, and accidentally pushed her magic towards him to shove him out of the Mountain's path with a wandless and nonverbal *expulso.* While the spell was normally intended for more violent means, Hermione's natural desire to see her friend safe had him landing on the earth with an *oof,* bouncing slightly as it turned squishy.

Then she pivoted on her heel, facing the oncoming man, and whipped her right arm out, letting her wand slip from the holster into her waiting palm. She bent her knees slightly and then swung her right arm up and around, a bright, vivid red bursting from the wand as she screamed, *"Diffindo!"*

In a truly amazing display of athleticism, the Mountain twisted his body away from the bright light, tilting his head and letting the spell graze past him, slicing open his cheek as his head rolled along. The spell then hit one of his men behind him, and the man nearly tore in two with the force of Hermione's magic.

In return, when Clegane turned to face Hermione head-on, she saw his eyes narrow in anger, and he roared at her, lifting his sword high to come down on a slash.

*Protego!* She thought, her wand pointed up and head into the swing to block it. The shield slamming into place in front of her just as the sword swung down. There was a loud *clang* as it hit, and Hermione grit her teeth, the blow vibrating the invisible shield, making it ripple.

*"Die you stupid magical cunt!"* the man shouted in her face. His breath rose hotly from his mouth, visible puffs of the air forming clouds around his face as he bore his weight down onto the sword and the spell, sending Hermione down to one knee.

She blinked away the freezing rain that continued to pound down on her, icy prickles turning her cheeks cold. She brought her other hand up to hold onto the bottom of her right hand and glared at the man.

Around her, the Mountain's men crashed into the rear of the Northern-Riverlands army like a tidal wave sweeping an unsuspecting beach, the wave crashing into the wet and weary soldiers. Men shouted and cried, and the very ground beneath them, already slick with freezing rain, began to tint red.
Hermione's knee slid and skid and she fell backward onto her rear, losing connection to her spell as it popped. Without the pressure against his sword, the Mountain stumbled forward, and Hermione rolled to the side to avoid the tip.

She popped up with her back facing the large man and swung around with her wand. A long sliver of icy blue-white fire gushed from it, coiling and sparking with audible hisses as she twisted and whipped her wand towards the man, the thin flame snapping out and catching the Mountain's arm.

The man howled in pain, leaping backward from her. His silver armour was blackened and burnt. The metal was spitting and steam rose from it in the cool air, as the whip as gone straight through to the skin, blistering it red. He eyed her warily.

For her part, Hermione stood there in the midst of battle, watching the large man while her heart pounded furiously in her chest. She panted heavily, her own breath escaping in tiny bursts, hot against the cold air. The flame-whip at her side matched her signature bluebell fire, making it an extension of the waterproof flames and as it obeyed its castor, the fire-whip curled comfortably around her without burning.

The Mountain twisted his sword in his hand, spinning the blade, and began to ease around Hermione, keeping his eyes trained on her.

In response, she cracked out the whip again, letting it snap down just to his left; he jumped hastily to avoid it, and she then volleyed the spell there; he again, jumped to avoid it. Inwardly, she laughed, thinking he looked like a startled rabbit.

"Think you're funny, do you, bitch?" he muttered, sensing her humour in the situation.

She smirked.

Deciding to try his luck, he burst forward, slashing sideways and forcing Hermione to bend awkwardly to avoid the blade while she swung her hand out to coil her whip around. She landed a solid hit on his back, making him cry out and arch his back. The metal sizzled and there was the acrid smell of burnt flesh.

Hermione grimaced and skipped away. However, one of his men raced at her, dragging his sword behind and alongside his body to sweep up and slice her open. Then, Torrhen was there, blocking the man's sword with his own to the point that sparks flew where the steel collided.

"Alright, My Lady?" he hollered over his shoulder, eyes forward and brows narrowed at the dirty and haggard man in front of him.

"Never better!" She called back with a grin, and found herself then back-to-back with him, facing out at the Mountain who was recovering, stretching, and standing tall. "Glad you're here, Torrhen!"

The Karstark scoffed. "Where else would I be but watching your back, milady?"

She grinned, and snapped the fire-whip, churning up a line of blackened grass and mud as she did so. She did it again for effect and felt her confidence grow as the Mountain eyed the ground warily.

"You can't hold that forever," he called out nastily.

She glared at him and muttered, "Just watch me."

Behind her, Torrhen pushed the soldier he was fighting off, and Hermione took that to mean she had to engage too and ducked under a swing of the man's sword that was parallel to the ground, but he
recovered from his one-handed swing to grab the hilt with both hands and changed direction, bringing the sword down towards her. Hermione dropped to her knees, and swung the whip, catching the man's ankle.

He roared and staggered, slamming his sword into the earth to hold himself up. Hermione pressed her advantage, backhanding the whip to come from the other direction and catching his right bicep, cutting through his armour and shirt underneath, biting into his skin and cauterizing the wound almost immediately as it dug in.

But the man recovered, yanking his sword and flinging it up and out. Hermione yelped, tripping backward on her boots, and the sword tip caught her hip. It was instantly on fire, pain radiating out from the thin line that cut through her jeans. Blood immediately began to well from the cut and down the fabric, mingling with the rain.

*Shit,* she thought, glancing down and letting her left-hand press flutteringly at her hip. Clegane charged towards her, intent to catch her other side and skewer her, his sword pointed straight at her to ram through. She turned sideways and the man rushed by her, his larger, heavier body knocking in her and sending her sprawling to the ground. Her wand fell from her hand and rolled away.

Triumph bloomed in his eyes as he twisted on his foot, planting it heavily behind him in a ready pose. He raised his arms in a two-handed grip of the hilt and swung down.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. *Robb – I'm sorry!*

A loud clang above her made her eyes pop open. She was ready to see Torrhen standing over her, using his body as protection, but it wasn't him. Instead, she looked up at a very tall, large man with tattered clothes, parts burnt and smelling like fire, and covered in dirt and muck and other stains. His black hair was long and scraggly in the rain, plastered to his neck and the side of his face, which was horribly puckered and burned.

"Out of the way, runt!" the Mountain snarled, pressing hard against the man's blade.

Unlike many others who would falter, this man met his force and pushed back, the ground beneath his boots slipping and caving in. "Fuck you!" he snarled back.

"I'll kill you!" the Mountain was enraged, his eyes wild as he stared at Hermione's saviour.

The man was unmoved, however, and snapped back, "Not if I kill you first, brother."

Hermione's eyes widened.

Then, the two were fighting, their swords a blur and only visible whenever they struck one another, sparks flying off. The clang of their ringing steel was lost in the cacophony of other steel hitting steel and the shouts of the men around them. The two brothers moved in a tight circle, one always pressing and then backing off, or dodging or leaning out of the way of the sword.

Taking the brief respite, Hermione eased to her feet, looking around for her wand. Spotting it a few feet from her, she thrust her palm out angrily and summoned it back to her nonverbally. It zoomed through the air and slammed into her hand, sensing her emotional state.

*I'm not letting you go that easily,* she thought nastily, launching herself forward and ducking under the Mountain's brother's arm as he completed an attack towards the Mountain's chest. *For Barbara, you asshole.*

Hermione slammed her hands to the freezing ground, her wand flat against it as she shouted,
"Glacius!"

Around her, the air dropped quickly, and the man protecting her swore, dancing backward and behind her. Eyes closed, from her under her palms burst a silvery light, which instantly froze. It quickly spread, snaking out and doubling, then tripling in size like a growing puddle of ice.

"What the fuck is this?" snarled the Mountain, glaring down at it. It reached the man's boots and began to freeze them. He swore and began hacking at the ice as its fingers crawled up his boots and then his calves. Within seconds, he was unable to move, his feet encased in ice as its thickened and hardened.

The ice continued to grow until it hit his waist, trapping half his body. Despite his size and strength, the man was unable to continue to hack at the ice; his skin quickly paled, turning clammy, and his lips tinged blue.

"What – wha—"

Hermione's eyes opened.

"Fuck me!" muttered the other Clegane; Hermione's eyes were a vibrant, glowing amber, lit from within. The thick sheet of ice that spilled from her hands and towards the Mountain cracked and splintered, creating long, thick shards. The cracked shards trembled and slowly rose. Despite the continued freezing rain coating the ice, the weight didn't cause them to dip heavily; instead, the ice built up on the shards, making them larger.

"For Barbara," the young witch murmured. "For justice."

And then the shards were expelled forward, directly at the Mountain. Unable to move, unable to escape or twist away, the thick ice shards hit the man with the force of a bludger hitting a Quidditch player, jerking the man back as they perforated his armour to the point of sticking out behind him, bloodied.

The man gasped and gurgled, blood sputtering from his mouth before trickling down into his well-groomed dark beard. And then he stilled, slumping forward and bent at the waist.

Hermione closed her eyes again and took a deep breath, exhaling it slowly. Then, she pulled her hands from the ground, palms sticking to the ice and pulling at her skin, ripping some from her. She curled her hands into fists to hide the evidence, and rose, swaying a bit.

At her side, the other Clegane stared at her, his jaw clenching and his fingers twitching on the hilt of his sword – he was unsure if she was a threat to him.

As they eyed each other up, the battle around them was quietening into just the cries of the wounded. Somewhere, a part of her recognized that Torrhen was angrily stabbing felled soldiers, ensuring their deaths and inability to get back up for an attack on a turned back.

Gregor Clegane did not have many men – not more than three dozen or so – but they had created enough chaos that they had ransacked and ripped several tents down, as well as destroyed a few of her fire pits. The attack had come as a surprise, and several soldiers from the rear were badly wounded if not dead.

"Lady Hermione!" a voice called, and she turned to face it.

On horseback, galloping towards her through the fog, Lord Bolton appeared, his own sword in his right hand bloodied. He came to a rest near her, his eyes coolly assessing the tall, scarred man beside
her. His sword began to rise.

"He protected me." The words were out of her mouth before she had time to think. "I would've died if it weren't for him."

Bolton presented the man with suspicious disbelief. "And what is Joffrey Lannister's dog doing so far North?"

The man scowled. "Tryin' to live my damn life. Kill my brother." He jerked his head towards Hermione. "Saw this one in trouble and thought to save her if only for a reward."

Bolton's eyes cooled further and he controlled his prancing, nervous horse. "Why would we reward you, Hound? A Lannister lapdog?"

Clegane's scowl deepened. "I'm no one's dog."

"Not even the pretender King's?"

"Fuck the King!" he spat.

Bolton wheeled his horse around, twisting his head and keeping the man in his sight. Eventually, he said, not looking at her, "Lady Hermione, His Grace is asking if you can send the wounded to the Twins? Or down the river at least to the head of the camp. We will be moving them to the castle immediately."

Hermione started. "Oh? I thought we were too far away and too early for Lord Frey."

"It seems that when the battle began, His Majesty sent his mother and a few men to the Twins for protection," explained Bolton quietly. "And Lord Frey saw that we are granted immediate access. He sent men out as well to help with the wounded."

With a sigh, Hermione nodded. Pointing her wand at the nearest injured soldier, she muttered with a flick at them, "Mobilicorpus." That soldier rose, floating gently in the rain, and she began walking until she reached two rather suspicious Frey bannermen, carrying a stretcher between them. She deposited the man onto the stretcher and then headed back for the next.

It took several hours, to the point where she was bone-deep chilled, but she helped with the recovery of injured soldiers and healed what she could with spells to give them a chance of survival. Bolton kept Clegane in his sight the whole time, monitoring the field from his horse as he directed others until all that remained was bloodied, churned up earth.

Bolton's eyes softened as they rested on her, and Hermione knew, as she balefully looked up at him, that she looked a bit like a drowned rat, her voluminous curly hair plastered flat and heavy on her shoulders.

"Take yourself and Sandor Clegane to the front of the camp, My Lady," the pale man instructed. "And get some rest."

Hermione, too tired to do anything else, wearily nodded and grabbed on to Clegane's arm. He started, beginning to say, "What the fuc—" but Hermione spun on her heel and Apparated them to where she had last seen Robb and his men begin pitching his tent. After the frantic fight on the Green Fork, Hermione was ready for some downtime, even if it was at the Twins.

They reappeared in the space where Robb's tent had been, torn down after the end of the battle. Looming before her were two towering structures on either side of the foamy, grey, churning river.
Something about the sight of them made her stomach clench uneasily.

Both towers were identical in size and shape: two jutting rectangular, grey blocks of stone that rose from the banks of the riverside. The castles each had one outer and one inner wall, with two separate courtyards and internal buildings for stables, garrisons, and other miscellanies. However, the imposing structures also boasted two very imposing gates: one facing the land on either side of the Twins, and one facing the bridge, guarded by hard-eyed Frey bannermen.

The bridge was thick and long - it required three large foundation blocks to support the arch bridge - and with a dense fog rolling across the water from the north, much of the bridge was unseen; invisible to the naked eye through the fizzy rain.

Hermione stumbled and accidentally leaned close to the towering man with the partially burnt face next to her. At her side, Sandor Clegane was swearing up a storm, half on his knees and he groaned in pain and vomited up a mixture of regurgitated food and stomach bile.

"You fucking cunt!" he was saying, halfway between a sob and snarl. His scowl twisted the scarred side of his face, deepening it and his dark eyes cut towards her. His lank hair reminded her of Professor Snape's: long, limp, and plastered to his forehead and along his neck with the damp rain.

Hermione looked at him, torn between complete apathy that was lined with the tiniest embers of sympathy in her chest. "It'll pass."

"It fucking better!"

Those who straggled in with Hermione, the last of those carried by Freys and other Northern and Riverlands soldiers that were alive were exhausted from the mad battle, several with injuries of some kind. Around them on horses and foot were men in the colours of the Twins, rushing about to help the most injured and a few more on horseback pushing past them thinking to provide cover for an enemy that was no longer there.

"Lady Hermione," called Torrhen, striding towards her through the crowd with an angry look on his face. It made her stand up straight and look him in the eyes as he stopped a mere arm's length from her. "If you ever - and I mean ever - do something like that again-!"

Hermione glared at her friend although her body was exhausted and she was sure it came across more as weary than angry. "Hopefully it won't be that down to the wire, Torrhen, but if you plan on finishing that sentence, I'm going to turn you into a ferret. Trust me, I've seen it happen, and it wasn't pleasant."

Torrhen's face twisted, but he snapped his mouth shut. Instead, he bit out, "His Grace wants to see you." His eyes cut the tall man beside her, finally straightening from his Apparation-induced vomit trip, who used to be a Lannister man through-and-through, and his nose twitched in disgust. "I suppose I'll find somewhere for you, Hound."

"Anywhere with ale," moaned the man as he straightened. "Fuck. Fucking cunts. Fucking witches. What the fuck!"

Hermione rolled her eyes and took off to find the King. Robb was easy to spot in the crowd, the shining auburn of his hair amongst the silver and dull browns and greys of the Twins and soldiers around them, with Grey Wind pacing angrily at the side and snapping his jaws at Twins soldiers on horseback - many of which were, although unnerved by the large beast, unmoved.

He was gesturing angrily to those of his guard around him, one arm flailing back and forth. As she
got closer, she could hear the anger thrumming in his voice.

"-weren't expecting to be attacked, Lord Frey! It was hardly our fault!"

"Be as that may," began a lean, hungry-looking man with a slight hunch next to Robb, "You did bring Lannister soldiers to me and mine. Of course, we are willing to help where we can…"

"I need a Maester for the most injured of course," interrupted Robb, donning his lofty "King" voice as Hermione called it, "If you'd permit, I'd leave those behind to convalesce in the Twins and set up camp here outside."

"Outside?" the man - Walder Frey - asked. His tone was incredulous, but his face barely moved. As Hermione approached to stand just behind Robb and to the side, she watched as his eyes swept over the incoming soldiers, some who required triage immediately, and others who were being helped to makeshift tents as they were popping up on the grounds around the bridge and gate, and then they rested on her.

Hermione shivered.

"Nonsense," the lord of the Twins mocked, eyes sliding back to Robb. Around him stood several unmov ing men and women, all with the same weak chin, beaded eyes, or high forehead that Lord Frey had. "We are to be… family, are we not? You are to marry one of my girls. Now would be the time to pick one, heh? Like Arwaya, my daughter, my daughter Walda, my daughter Derwa, or my daughter Waldra."

His eyes roved over each of the women around him as he spoke, pointing them out with his gaze falling on the woman before moving on to the next. "What about my eldest granddaughters Janeya and Neyela? Serra and Sarra, granddaughters, are twins, heh!" He sighed when Robb remained unmoved. "Well, then, but first - guest rights."

At the man's side a servant - a steward or castellan, as Hermione had learned over the year in Westeros – stepped forward with a plate of bread and salt. He extended it to Robb, who took the bread, broke some off, and chewed.

Frey's eyes gleamed and he allowed his voice to carry over not just the royal party and kingsguard, but those of his men as well. "My honored guests, be welcome within my walls and at my table. I extend to you my hospitality and my protection in the light of the Seven."

After Robb finished his bread, he formally and loudly announced, "House Stark humbly accepts House Frey's hospitality and protection."

Then, he spoke softer. "Lord Frey, my thanks for your hospitality. I realize that we are… much earlier than you anticipated for our summit, but perhaps - you can provide us with refuge - and men - in case the Lannisters chasing us push onward. Can I count on you?"

The man, whom Hermione could see a vague resemblance to Black Walder Frey in the coolly assessing eyes and hawkish nose, nodded slowly. "Of course, of course. Please… let my women set up rooms for you and yours. We can begin those talks you wished to have later tonight," he offered, turning partially for Robb to draw alongside him. "Yes - a bit earlier than you anticipated, but still… we can make due. I will always make time for my liege."

Robb nodded, and walking with Walder Frey, entered the nearest of the gates. The heavy iron was black-tipped and Hermione, passing underneath it, felt a sense of foreboding that she wasn't quite sure how to respond to.
The outer courtyard within the outer walls was filled with horses, smithy's, and the Twins garrison on this side of the river. Frey was going on about the agenda for their peace talks, and plans for the Riverlands as Robb and the Northern army continued northwards to return to Winterfell and begin their preliminary scouts westward to fight the Greyjoys.

Hermione followed silently behind the two men, eyes on the back of Robb's head and the dewdrops that lingered in his auburn hair, darkened to a deep brown with the rain. She drew level with Catelyn, and absently reached out her other hand to Grey Wind and he snuffled against her side, eerie yellow eyes focused intently on the two men ahead of them, as well.

"My only request is that none of your men bring their weapons to my Hall," the older man was wheezing, as they made to enter the inner wall, "It's just a personal quirk, I'm sure you understand, My - ah - Your Grace?"

"Yes, of course," agreed Robb hastily, glancing around as the courtyard filled with injured northern men and Riverlands men, many who moaned with pain.

"And the witch, of course," the man continued. At the reference to her, Hermione jumped, her head snapping around to the man.

She narrowed her eyes at him just as Robb glanced back warily at her, and met her eyes. His mouth turned down in a frown as he spoke to the man at his side, despite never leading her face, "What do you mean?"

Walder Frey stopped walking, so Robb and those that followed did so, too. The man stared hard at Robb when he turned back to the man. "She carries some kind of weapon, does she not?"

"Oh, ummm…"

"No weapons," insisted Frey, a strange glint in his eyes. "This *is* a peaceful talk between two allies, is it not?"

Robb swallowed. "Yes, it is - but -"

The stare that Frey levelled against Robb made Hermione swallow back the instinctive desire to snap out a bat-bogey hex. The two continued to negotiate and speak back and forth, but eventually, with a miserable look on his face, Robb turned back and walked the few paces over to her and his mother.

"Hermione - I'm sorry - Lord Frey -"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. She waved a hand around them, and instantly a strange buzzing noise cut their conversation off from anyone eavesdropping as the *muffliato* kept them in a cone of silence. She dropped her own voice to a low murmur to say, "It seems really fishy that he doesn't want weapons in the Hall, Robb."

Robb, half-confused, glanced at her. "Fishy?"

"Odd, you know? Weird? Strange?" Hermione sighed. "Look - I understand guest rights, I really do. But asking me to leave my wand behind is like asking you to leave Grey Wind outside. Magic is a part of me, just like he's a part of you."

At Robb's wince, Hermione's mouth dropped open. "You are *kidding* me!"
"He thinks Grey Wind is going to scare his servants!" protested Robb, but it sounded lame to them both. And he knew it. He sighed. "That he's not some sort of - sort of, I don't know - pet! That one brings in to a Hall."

Hermione was silent for a few moments; staring hard at the man she considered a friend, and maybe, something more. "That's bullshit."

Robb's wince was more pronounced. "I am. Aware, Hermione. What would you have me do?"

"Refuse."

Robb stared hard at Hermione, and she refused to budge down.

"Hermione—"

"Robb." Hermione's tone left no more for argument. "Are you the King here, or is Frey?"

"I am, Hermione, but..." he trailed off, glancing away. His voice dropped. "What would you have me do, Hermione? Insult him in his own home? Wage a war on him as well, with my diminished numbers? My mother brokered an alliance that has me marrying one of his daughters or granddaughters. I've been pushing that off for some time now, and if I do anything else..."

"You fear a reprisal," sighed Hermione, closing her eyes painfully. "I understand that, Robb, I do – but am I not enough—"

"Gods! You are! You are enough!" he rushed out to say, making her eyes pop open in surprise. "Hermione, please – don't think like that. If I—" his mouth slammed shut with an audible snap, and there was a panicked look in his eyes which caused him to stop speaking immediately.

He took a few moments to collect himself, breathing in heavily. He then took a step outside the spell's barrier, shattering the privacy the spell afforded and then said, "Hermione. I understand where you are coming from, I really do. But, as King in the North, I cannot afford to slight Lord Frey. Your points are valid and I respect them. But I am going to adhere to his wishes."

"While I think Lady Hermione makes a point," interjected Catelyn smoothly, glancing at them both, as she had been reading their lips while separated from the rest of the crowd. "I agree that we must observe the guest rights that Lord Frey is offering us, Robb. He is extending his honour and we are duty-bound to respond."

Fuck honour, thought Hermione darkly, watching as Robb and Catelyn began a low conversation about duty, honour, and the deal she brokered with Lord Frey, who was standing rather impatiently just underneath an overhang in the courtyard.

"What's going on?" asked Torrhen, quietly stepping up beside her.

"Frey wants me to leave my wand behind and Grey Wind to remain outside," she muttered back, eyes watching the three carefully.

Torrhen frowned. "That's not a good idea."

"You think something seems off here, too?"

Torrhen slowly nodded. "I'll be on my guard, as long as you are."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, but without my wand. My wandless abilities aren't exactly amazing, you
know? And while it seems that I am getting better, now isn't the time I want to test myself under stress."

"Can you fake your wand?" asked Torrhen instead.

Hermione paused, and then a smile lit up her entire face. She exclaimed, loudly, drawing attention to her, "Oh, Torrhen! You're a genius!"

She brought her hands up and cupped his face, drawing him down and giving him a loud smacking kiss on both cheeks. Making a show of it, she slid her wand from her holster, along with her last hair tie from the ponytail she had her hair up in.

*Let's see if I actually learned anything from the Weasley twins,* she thought, and with a sleight of hand, nonverbally transfigured the hair tie into a passable copy of her wand, pressing it against Torrhen's chest in such a way that both lay flat; the fake wand was closest to Frey.

"Can you keep my magical wand safe for me, Torrhen? Perhaps you can give it to Daryn? We all know how strong and honourable he is, especially since he's staying out here with the injured men to help them during this trying time!" she loudly exclaimed, ensuring her voice carried.

Torrhen, desperately wanting to roll his eyes at her overly fake act, forced out instead, "Oh. Yes. Of course, Lady Hermione. I aim to serve!"

"Merlin, don't overdo it," hissed Hermione, turning her body slightly so her shoulder blocked her other hand sliding her wand into her jacket's sleeve.

"Overdo it? Have you heard yourself?" hissed back Torrhen, but he plastered a bright smile on his face and stepped back, and then made a courtly bow. Loudly, he said, "Oh, thank you, Lady Hermione! I will take care of your magic wand!"

He shot her a look, and then turned on his heel, back towards a cluster of northern men at the far courtyard wall, including one very bewildered Daryn Hornwood.

"Grey Wind," said Robb, eyes wide, flickering between her and the retreating figure of Torrhen with suspicion, "Go with Karstark."

The wolf whined, loudly.

Robb knelt in front of his wolf, wrapped his hands around his wolf's ears, and gave the thick fur along his neck a good scratch.

"I know," he murmured, "It's only for now. I promise. I'll come visit, soon."

Grey Wind whined again, but gave his human a lick on the face, causing Robb to sputter out a laugh, and then turned and headed towards Torrhen. Robb then turned to face Walder Frey, and asked, coolly, "Is this sufficient, My Lord?"

The older man nodded and gestured for Robb to join him. A Frey bannerman opened the inner wall gate, and the two disappeared into the inner castle, a conversation between them on the logistics of the peace talk and summit they were going to host with the rest of the Lords from the North and Riverlands.

The conversation continued, and Hermione began to trail behind a bit with Catelyn, who was also frowning at the men.
"Is it just me, or does that mean exude creep?" she muttered to the older woman. "Like, it's my wand. I can do magic without it, but really? Demanding things like that? To someone who is supposed to be his king?"

"Lord Frey is incredibly shrewd and dangerous," replied Catelyn darkly. "But as much as I dislike it, I must agree with you, Lady Hermione. It is strange behaviour."

"Oh, wonderful," replied Hermione, with an eye roll. "These talks are going to be a real blast, then, aren't they?"

"Be on your guard," instructed Catelyn, turning to face the woman just briefly as they entered the inner courtyard and walled defense. "And keep that wand hidden for as long as you can. We don't want to break guest rights."

"You saw that?" asked Hermione, only the tiniest bit guilty. Her safety, as well as Robb's and Torrhen's, meant she would have done anything to keep her wand with her.

"It was a smart precaution," said Catelyn instead.

"My ladies?" a female Frey asked, coming up to them and giving a shallow curtsy. She was rather plain looking with an overbite that made Hermione wince at in reminder of her own teeth before her fourth year. "Your rooms are this way."

They were led through a series of winding staircases that led up and up. There were only ten rooms per floor, and with the many members of the Frey family, as well as dignitaries and guests from the North and Riverlands, they were brimming and at full capacity - leaving Hermione and Catelyn to share the Stark-reserved floor at the highest level.

Their rooms were next to one another, and Hermione gave the older woman a nod goodbye as she entered her room. The view out of the singular window was spectacular, even though the landscape was despairingly grey, wet, and overcast. There were two single beds in the room, and Hermione picked the nearest to the fireplace. She still hadn't become used to the damp weather the further north they had travelled, and it was beginning to seep into her bones.

Eventually, Dacey joined her in the room, her eyes taking in all the nooks and crannies quickly with a practiced eye.

"Well, it's not Riverrun," she finally said, flopping down on the bed.

"How many did we lose?" asked Hermione, turning to her friend.

Dacey sighed and stretched, leaving her feet and legs dangling off the side. "A fair number, but your alarm brought attention to what was happening in the rear sooner than we'd have noticed. Surprised you brought the Hound along though."

"Why not? He helped protect me and tried to kill his brother," retorted Hermione, removing her beaded bag from her shoulder and placing it on the bed. "Doesn't he deserve a chance? What's he done against you?"

"All Cleganes are bad, Hermione," said Dacey quietly, anger thrumming in her voice.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't believe that."

"Like you believe that the Kingslayer can be saved?" there was a sneer in her voice.
"Merlin above, Dacey! The man lost his hand! No one is paying his ransom or taking the offer to exchange him for Sansa," snapped Hermione. "I think he's having a pretty damn difficult time of it, don't you? His entire world has been altered." Hermione let out a loud huff of air. "Why do we keep arguing about this?"

"It's fun to rile you up," replied the dark-haired Mormont, and she grinned, sitting up. "Anyway - I overheard a few of the other Lords on my way up. We've got a few days of rest before the summit begins."

"Doing what?" asked Hermione incredulously, looking around the small room.

Dacey shrugged. "But I did hear something interesting."

"Oh?"

"There's going to be a feast first before the talks begin!" the Mormont woman's grin turned devious. "I hope you brought a nice dress in that bag of yours, Hermione."

It was Hermione's turn to flop onto the bed, face first. The bedcover failed to hide her groan.

Despite their early arrival to the Twins, it appeared that Walder Frey had everything ready for them, and as such, the feast was planned for the following evening, giving everyone from the Northern and Riverlands army time to rest in their rooms and then freshen up. Hermione wasn't particularly enamoured with the idea of wearing a dress, but Dacey was insisting.

"You wore dresses before," the tall Mormont said, frowning and wondering why her friend was being stubborn about it. "Why are you adverse to it now?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Hermione, rolling her eyes and turning her back on her friend, "Maybe it has something to do with drama, terror, and horror around every corner? And trousers are just easier to run and fight in?"

"Hear, hear," cheered Dacey darkly, saluting Hermione with a small cup of wine. They were in the assigned shared room and were missing the convenience of Hermione's tent.

The fire was burning in their fireplace, and the two, in true female form, had taken over the space with the beaded bag contents spilled out and over every imaginable surface in the room. Dacey had quickly chosen to wear her usual combat gear but allowed Hermione to make a few stylistic changes in the colour so it was more "festive" (in her words), and by adding the silk to her sleeves, attaching them to the leather cuffs she wore along her wrists. She was finishing up by pulling her hair into a braid, staring intently at her reflection with the pocket mirror Hermione carried, the one linked to Robb, Arya, and Sansa.

Meanwhile, Hermione refashioned her periwinkle blue Yule Ball dress. It didn't fit on her anymore, but mixing the fabric and overlaying it with a few other items in her beaded bag meant she had a working dress, even if it was a mess.

Dacey's pleasantly surprised and intrigued face said it all: a high Mandarin collar from a repurposed sleeveless vest in shiny black silk merged into a tight pair of black leggings tucked into ankle boots. Overtop her leggings, Hermione used the sheer periwinkle fabric, bleeding it from a black to silver ombre in the Stark colours, as a long, ankle-length skirt. There were layers, so the black leggings weren't fully visible, but it was obvious enough that the fabric wasn't solid. There was an ethereal quality to the sleeveless dress that hugged her curves, even if the silky fabric of the skirt was full. It certainly was different to anything anyone in Westeros wore!
Hermione affixed her wand holster on her right arm, the one that hid her wand. There was no way she was going to leave it behind - and even so, her magic would be called upon under extreme duress. She was always armed.

"Is wearing your holster like that a good idea?" asked Dacey quietly, eyeing the leather.

Hermione shrugged. "What else can I do? I don't feel comfortable walking around this place without it, but I don't have anywhere in this dress to hide it."

"What about under your skirt?"

"Like around the thigh?" asked Hermione for clarification, and together the two hoisted up the layered silk to bare her black leggings, Dacey kneeling in front of her. The other woman tapped the inside of Hermione's right thigh.

"Here," she said. "We can use ribbon."

"I can transfigure it instead," offered Hermione, removing her holster and transfiguring the ribbon Dacey held out into a belt-like strap. With Dacey's help, she wrapped it around his leg, high enough that the darker coloured fabric of the skirt covered it. Hermione then hooked the holster into the strap, and let the skirt fall.

"Feels weird," she said, feeling the holster rub against her other thigh.

"I'll do for tonight," said Dacey. "I've got some daggers; can you use some spell on them? I've seen some looks from the Frey men that I'm not interested in pursuing further."

Soon after, the two women left their room, Hermione taking the time to not only cast a disillusionment charm on Dacey's daggers but also her beaded bag, which she shrunk and then tucked into the holster. By the time they got to the second-bottom floor, several flights down, Hermione was fairly used to the odd sensation of her thigh holster.

The Hall was on the second floor of the inner castle, with a third floor overlooking it partially from a balcony and catwalk, which led to the main Lord's chambers. The Hall itself was full, with several long tables lining up on either side with a central aisle facing a raised dais just under the balcony. Lord Walder Frey had a throne-like chair there. In front was a large, free space for dancing.

Upon entering, the Freys and their bannermen choked on their drinks when she and Dacey appeared while the North and Riverlands men and Lords were used to Hermione's eccentrics (in their opinion, anyway), so much so that her strange dress made them not bat their eyes.

"Just grin," reminded Dacey through her teeth, and Hermione did just so. "It looks like His Grace left a space for you at the royal table."

Whatever bitterness Dacey might once have held for Hermione had long since disappeared, but there was something still quietly disheartening in her friend's voice that made Hermione turn to her in question. The other woman just flattened her lips and shook her head. Her eyes were sad though, despite her encouraging tone when she said, "Go. Just go! I'll speak to you later."

Hermione, frowning, set off towards the first table nearest the raised dais, on the right, where Robb spotted her. He stood, his deep blue eyes swept her from head to toe, and there was a grin on his face when she approached.

"You look beautiful," he said quietly, greeting her with a kiss on the back of her hand. He helped her into her seat and then took his on her right. On her other side was Catelyn, who had a sour look on
her face, one that eased as she sighed. On Hermione's other side was Lord Bolton and then Umber, Karstark, and Glover; Bracken and Blackwood were two tables behind.

Walder Frey stood, and in his gravelly voice, gave speeches. He pushed a few flat jokes about Robb's upcoming marriage to one of his daughters (or granddaughters, or great-granddaughters) as a threat and reminder of the promise Catelyn made. It didn't endear him to anyone in the room, but those in the room quickly attention turned to their stomach as the food was brought out from a convenient side door, underneath and off to the side of the balcony.

Platter after platter of suckling pig, roasts, potatoes, reeds and vegetables, chicken and quail, any heavenly, creamy soups and broths were presented, their delicious scents wafting across the tables and making Hermione's stomach rumble loudly.

Arbor Gold wine from the Reach was poured, and then the musicians began playing. A conversation began among those at the tables, and soon, as more and more alcohol was poured, the laughter and conversation grew louder and louder. Freys were laughing and joking with the Greatjon, and Karstark seemed to be in the middle of a debate with Blackwood and Bracken. Black Walder Frey was at his father's side, whispering in his ear, while Catelyn and her uncle, the Blackfish, were watching as several more serving girls back a circuit of the room, always passing in front of Robb like they were being shown off.

Hermione tapped the toe of her boot to the beat as Dacey threw herself into the crowd, catching the first man she came across and moved him onto the floor with her as her partner. Others joined her, and soon the floor was crowded.

Torrhen was the first to encourage her to join him on the floor, and knowing that her friend was just as poorly suited to the task of dancing as she was, Hermione laughingly agreed. Together they spun around the floor in the exuberant reels that the North favoured. After the song, Lord Karstark took her as his partner, and then Bracken and Blackwood; Lucas Blackwood blushed a furious red when he asked her, but she agreed, and then she breathlessly decided to sit a few out to catch her breath, a grin splitting her cheeks.

Several songs later, a voice interrupted her conversation with Torrhen.

"My Lady?"

Hermione looked up, seeing Robb standing before her.

He extended his hand, and Hermione, glancing between it and his face, and blushed furiously and shook her head. "Oh, no! Honestly, Robb - I couldn't! You know I don't know the steps!"

"It didn't stop you earlier, Lady Hermione," he grinned, wiggling his fingers. "C'mon - give it a try. I promise I won't lead you anywhere you don't want to go."

"There was something strange in his tone, thought Hermione, eyeing him; softness to his face that Hermione had been seeing more and more often.

"Oh, just go," muttered Torrhen from her side, an amused smile on his face. He shoved her ankle under the table with his foot.

Hermione glanced back at Robb. It was that softness that prompted her to stand - not Torrhen. Instead, her friend catcalled over the strings and the brass of the musicians on the balcony overlooking the Great Hall, and Hermione resolutely ignored it even if her cheeks blushed.

Robb's hand was warm in hers, and he gently pulled her close, placing her hand in the crook of his...
elbow as he led her between other dancing partners, somewhere in the middle of the crowd. Around her were men and women - Frey, Stark, Karstark, Umber, Mormont, Glover, Bolton, Ryger, Blackwood and more - bowing and curtseying. There was a moment of breathless anticipation, and then they were moving.

The strings on the strange mandolin-style instrument echoed in the room and the beat, while not quick, was fast enough that there was some immediate, intricate footwork. Hermione kept her eyes on Robb's feet, glancing at Dacey every few steps. She eased by Robb, following him with her chin over her shoulder as he mimicked her, his steps with a bit more flair and a twist for his wrist.

Dacey, who was nearby, had her head thrown back, barking out a loud laugh and wide smile on her face as her partner, Eddard Karstark, grinned. Hermione felt her heart swell with happiness.

It wasn't a waltz, a simple one-two-three-four, but there were crisscrossing steps and Hermione nearly stumbled - but then Robb moved forward and caught her arm and suddenly they were twirling, like an energetic reel, and Hermione was startled enough that she laughed out loud.

Her eyes caught Robb's and he grinned.

His cheeks were flushed and the grin on his face made him seem years younger - the weight of being a King was off his shoulders - and there, at that moment, he was just another young man dancing, spinning. Quicker and quicker, he led her through the other partners and weaving their arms under and then over the other couples as they moved through the archways that they made, until they were at the end of the line nearest to where Lord Frey sat, glowering over the entire Hall.

Then, he spun her sharply and they were the ones moving under the arm tunnel, and back to the side-steps, a dance within a dance as they were always off to the side of one another, never chest-to-chest, until -

Robb swept Hermione back into his arms, close enough that she felt his breath on her face. He was looking down at her, his eyes focused and tracing her features: the light dusting of freckles on her nose, her amber eyes and she was sure something was going to happen, right then and there in Frey's Great Hall, when his eyes dropped to look at her lips -

Then they were spinning again, around and around, and the room blurred past her but all Hermione could see was Robb, holding her steady and his blue eyes so focused on hers. The colours and sounds of the room faded away, and it was just them, moving around and around, eyes only on one another until the music came to a startling end, and they stopped, breathing heavily and just looking at each other.

The crowd laughed, loudly cheering, and Hermione sucked in a deep breath of air, carefully stepping back and away from Robb. As she did so, she dropped her eyes and watched as her arms slid from his grasp, until his fingers were left just clutching, dangling on her fingertips - a last connection, a last breathless moment of something that happened between them -

But she stepped back once more and laughed nervously, fanning herself. "I think I need a drink!"

And, as she moved between couples and others still on the dance floor, she felt the hard stare of his eyes on her back but didn't turn around. She couldn't - not only because of where they were, but because of who they were: he was a King, promised to marry one of Lord Frey's many children (or grandchildren, or great-grandchildren), and she - well, she was the witch from another world who just wanted to go home.

(Didn't she?)
She ended up next to Torrhen, who had been sitting at the guest of honour table set up for Robb and his chosen entourage of Lords, as well as Hermione and her guard. Sober, Torrhen quirked Hermione a small smile, pushed a goblet towards her across the table and silently topped it off with Arbor Gold.

He didn't need to say anything. He knew - he had seen a lot over those months, the past year, and Hermione took a deep gulp of the wine to hide her eyes.

Eventually, Robb returned to the table, as did Dacey, and a few others. Robb ended up in discussion with Lord Ryger and a kingsguard member, Lucas Blackwood, and Hermione felt the weight of his eyes as they constantly flicked over to her.

Off near the one end, Karstark, the Greatjon, and Bracken were in a discussion of something heated, their faces flushed with wine and ale, and the Greatjon slammed his fist on the table, making their nearby dishes rattle.

Catelyn, who was one free seat over with her uncle, the Blackfish, shot them a nasty glare. Hermione, nursing her third drink of that evening - the one Torrhen poured her -, glanced over as Catelyn heaved a sigh.

"Don't you drink, Lord Glover?" she asked, turning back to the man she was conversing with before the Greatjon's emphatic interruption.

Lord Glover's eyes gleamed in the dark and he smiled thinly. "Never do, my Lady. It dulls the senses."

The Blackfish looked at him incredulously. "That's the point! Anyway, my Lord - are ready you to return home? Once this silly summit of peace talks or whatever it is we're calling it - is over, His Majesty will have us moving back North to retake Winterfell and clear those sons of whores once and for all!"

"It would make me very happy," replied the man, dipping his head slightly. "I do look... forward to things."

Catelyn looked at him oddly, but the Blackfish belched beside her and she grimaced. "Pardon, my Lord, my Lady - but I need to find a tree to piss on."

Catelyn waved him away with a disgusted look on her face, and he stood, Lord Glover standing with him. "I'll make sure he finds his way," he told Catelyn wryly and disappeared with the large Tully.

Now sitting by herself, Hermione wondered if she should move over, talk to the woman on her first excursion out of Riverrun after Robb's imprisonment of her for her actions. With Jaime back in their grasp, everything she did was for nothing, even before the discovery of Arya's location and Bran and Rickon's survival. However, solitary confinement, her father's death, and Arya's return had helped straighten some of Catelyn's muddled thoughts; enough, anyway, for her to join them on the diplomatic summit at the Twins, given that she original brokered the deal.

The moment she made her mind up, rising from the long bench, Hermione heard the music change from the upbeat reels to something more somber. The string - something similar to a violin - began to play. The door at the far end of the hall, leading out towards the bridge, was shut by two Frey bannermen.

"Your Grace," called out Walder Frey, his reedy voice rising across the slow, haunting melody, quickly silencing the room while the music, a single verse of some sort, looped. Robb stood, and
turned to face the man on his dais as Ryger and Lucas stepped back from him respectfully.

"I feel that I've been... remiss... in my duties. I've given you meats, wine, and music. But! I haven't shown you the hospitality you deserve." He finished with a thin chuckle.

Quickly, the voices died down at the slow draw of the string as it slowly built. Hermione glanced around, pausing. The heavy, tense air that suddenly appeared had her heart begin to beat quickly, and at her side, Torrhen had bolted to his feet, eyes wide. Catelyn, further down, was staring at Lord Glover, who had returned from showing the Blackfish out, but…

Why is he in chainmail? wondered Hermione, eyes narrowing. Something's not right here... we were supposed to leave all weapons at the door!

Robb stood apart, his kingsguard scattered around the room, some, like Daryn Hornwood, too drunk even to stand, as they tried to understand the change in the atmosphere. Dacey, the nearest, had a perplexed look on her face.

Torrhen shoved away from the table, pushing so hard that the goblets rattled and several fell over, as he roared, "YOUR GRACE! MOVE! LADY HERMIONE!"

Hermione turned and found herself face-to-face with Lord Glover, the thin man impassively staring down at her, a queer look in his eyes. Her eyes darted down, at the dagger in his hand.

Oh fuck, her mind supplied, and then everything sped up, in disjointed bursts of images and flickering torchlight, all overlaid with the same haunting melody.

Someone screamed, and Hermione lurched back, into the table as it dug into the small of her back, just as Glover lunged forward, his gloved hand grabbing her collar. He raised his arm over his head to swing the dagger down, but Hermione grabbed his gloved hand and with her left, and swung her right arm up to brace her forearm with her hand against the man's chest.

The impact jarred her. She shoved forward with her weight braced against the older, taller man, shouting in the racket, "EXPULSO!" and watched as he flew backward, slamming into the wall behind them and sliding down, unconscious.

However, in the time she was dealing with Glover, a battle had erupted inside the Hall. Torrhen was at her side, twisting her around to look her over quickly, and then placed himself between her and the rest of the room, unarmed. A Frey soldier ran at him, sword already bathed red in someone's blood. Torrhen reached back for one of the pewter plates and sent it flying at the man like a Frisbee.

Hermione used the man's distraction, ripping the front of her skirt to expose the black leggings underneath. She grabbed her wand from her holster, raising her arm.

She snapped out, "diffindo," watching as the vicious blue light sliced the man's throat. He dropped to the floor.

Torrhen raced forward and took the man's sword, and then joined the melee, Hermione at his side. Robb was somewhere in the mess, and she needed to find him. Dimly, she was aware that the music had stopped and another noise had overtaken the hall - that of screams, and roars of pain - but it wasn't just coming from inside the Great Hall.

Horror overtook her, and she glanced at the high, open windows that faced towards the inner courtyard. They're attacking us outside, too!

She went to move around Torrhen, but slid on some warm, fresh blood, and fell to her knees.
"Shit!" she screeched, scrambling in the warm liquid as she struggled to rise.

The face of a somewhat familiar Stark bannerman, eyes wide open, mouth slack, greeted her. Hermione swallowed back rising bile and looked up, determination in her every feature.

Someone roared - the Greatjon her mind supplied - and then, without realizing it, she was back at Hogwarts during the Final Battle. Spells flew from her wand, a repeated litany: *diffindo, expulso, reducto, sectumsempra*.

Blood splattered across her face, staining her ombré silks; blood on her knees and legs from where she had slipped and skidded in it previously caked and hardened to the point that her leggings were soaked and stiff. Torrhen was beside her, slashing his own way through the men, trying to get to Robb, to Dacey, to Daryn or Lucas or Eddard, or anyone else he could see struggling without weapons. The blood that coated him, coated her, and she wasn't sure if it was hers or his or someone else's anymore.

A Frey guard came up from Hermione's unguarded left, while her face was turned right. Torrhen lunged across her vision, physically throwing himself at the Frey, and both collapsed to the floor in a tangle of limbs, grappling for the fallen swords. In between, they punched and clawed, and Hermione couldn't get a clear line to the man to cast.

Just as she was about to summon Torrhen, to yank him off the man, Torrhen gasped and paused.

Hermione's heart stopped.

"Torrhen?" she whispered.

Then, he stood, shakily. The Frey was dead, his neck at an odd angle. Hermione breathed in relief, watching carefully as Torrhen listed a bit to the side.

"Torrhen?" she asked again. "Are you alright?"

The tall Karstark turned and nodded his head, his face almost painted red; only parts of his forehead and his chin were clear - the entire right side of his face was red, and his left had numerous splatter marks. He looked like an avenging god.

"Let's go."

Hermione nodded, and slashed her wand viciously as she neared a Frey - one of the Lord's many sons - and watched as the spell went through his leathers, through his skin, and deeply gouged a line as he was cut from hip to shoulder, a diagonal mimicry of Dolohov's own scar on her torso.

He fell, and then Robb was there - they had managed to cross the frenzied floor. But he was staggering to his feet, eyes wide and mouth pressed tight in a pained line. There was an arrow in his shoulder (*the other one*, her mind supplied, thinking back to the injury she healed at the Crag), high enough that it wasn't fatal, but it was dangerous enough that it pierced through his tunic and vest.

"The King in the North arises!" mocked Walder Frey, but Hermione had no time for him, slipping on the stone, and tripping over a body.

The *twang* and snap of another arrow being released caught her attention over the noise in the hall, and another arrow slammed into Robb, lower this time but still near his shoulder, and he stumbled back - they were aiming to keep him unstable and incapable of fighting.

She caught herself on the back of a chair, hunched over, and lurched closer to Robb.
He looked up from the second arrow, saw her, and groaned, quietly, "Hermione…” but she heard him all the same over all the other noise.

Somewhere, distantly, Hermione heard Catelyn shouting, "Lord Walder! Lord Walder, enough! Let it end! Please! He is my son, my first son!" and the man reply. But, just as she was within feet of Robb, a shadowy figure behind him caught her eye.

"Robb! Behind you!" she shouted, but her voice was lost.

His pained eyes frowned at her, but at her panic, he turned - and there was Glover, nursing a nasty looking head wound, but still moving forward, his dagger out - and then it flashed forward and Robb hunched over. She could hear the man clearly - as his voice had a sonorus specifically made for her ears.

"The Lannisters send their regards."

And Hermione screamed.

Someone else was screaming, too, but her eyes were on the redhead as he staggered back, away from Glover with wide eyes and his hands pressed at his stomach.

Then, Hermione was clutching at Robb, and turning him to face her as they both sunk to their knees in the middle of the chaos. His eyes were cloudy, and there was a line of blood around his lips, and his face was pale, but it was lined with anger and pain.

"Hermione," he gasped, shuddering, "Do it. Do it, please."

One shaking hand reached up from pressing against his wound, and he touched the silver direwolf, commissioned so long ago now, on his jackets' over flap.

Hermione nodded shakily, and Robb sank in on himself, struggling to breathe. They were no longer touching. Hermione had her wand in one bloody hand, pointed at her own direwolf pin on her collar.

Their eyes met, and, as they held, she whispered, "Gryffindor."

His eyes were the last thing she saw before there was a violent hook in her navel and a nauseating swirl of colours as the world blurred around them.
"Maester! Medic!" as well as the moans and cries of others who were unused to the Portkey travel. Hermione could hear someone weeping, another screaming out, as well as the Greatjon's loud, rumbling voice shouting, "Numbers! Numbers! Where are our men? Form up!"

"Torrhen?" whispered Hermione, coming to his side.

"Lady… Hermione!" he gasped, opening his eyes. They were glassy and bright, and he grimaced as he tried to move.

Hermione's eyes moved down her friend's face, beyond the blood splatter on his cheeks and forehead and the large amount on his leathers and chest plate, both stained a deep, rusty red. Her eyes stopped, however, at Torrhen's lower stomach, where his hands were clasped tightly, pressing down.

"Torrhen?" cried Hermione, shooing away his hands only to see blood bubble up and seep through a large wound that stretched under his plate armour at his waist. She gagged at the sight of squishy innards.

"A- a flesh… wound, milady," the Karstark gasped.

A sob that masked as a laugh burst from Hermione's mouth. "No, you're right, a flesh wound," she said, tears welling in her eyes. Hermione scrambled for her beaded bag from under her skirt, reaching in and wordlessly summoning Essence of Dittany. "Nothing a little potion can't fix, Torrhen."

"EDDARD? TORRHEN?"

Lord Karstark's voice boomed through the night, but Hermione paid no mind. She poured the potion directly onto Torrhen's wound, but it did little. Hissing where it touched hot blood, Torrhen grit his teeth but a mangled shout still burst from his lips, and Hermione watched in growing frustration and horror that only the internal bleeding around his intestines had stopped, but the wound did not seal.

"C'mon, please," whispered Hermione frantically, summoning a blood-replenishing potion from her beaded bag. She pointed her wand at Torrhen and tried Snape's counterspell to Sectumsempra, hoping it would work. "Vulnera Sanentur! Please, Torrhen, Merlin - please!"

"Lady Hermione!" Across from her, a bloodied Eddard Karstark skidded to a halt, crashing to his knees. His wide eyes stared at his brother, and he reached forward, grasping his brother's hand. His head turned and he shouted, "FATHER! HERE!"

Rickard Karstark appeared shortly, watching Hermione as she tried spell after spell. "Lady Hermione - please. Please tell me -"

"I'm trying!" she cried, tears spilling over onto her cheeks. She angrily wiped them away with the back of a bloody hand, leaving a bloody streak, and tipped more Essence of Dittany into the wound. But the potion just pooled and then bubbled over across Torrhen's lower stomach onto the frozen ground beneath him. That ground was slowly staining red.

"Lady - Hermione," gasped Torrhen.

"Shh, shh, Torr - don't speak," muttered Karstark tearily.

Somewhere, behind them, Hermione could hear Greatjon shouting, "Where's the King?! Where's Lady Stark?"

Torrhen's eyes, growing hazy, lazily slid to his father and brother on his other side.
"Father. Edd." He gave them a watery smile. "It's…"

He coughed and his body shuddered. More blood poured from his wound and Hermione swore loudly and furiously. A grin tugged at Torrhen's lips as he heard it. "He'mione… s'ok."

"No!" burst Hermione, the word catching on a sob. She fell back on her heels, kneeling at his side and grabbing his other hand. "No, it's not okay, Torrhen!"

"I did… m'duty," he gasped, eyes back on her. His body shook with tremors. "For - King Robb. For you, Lady - 'Mione." He gave a tiny smile at the sobbing witch at his side. "I'd - do it - 'gain."

Hermione wordlessly shook her head, blinking rapidly to dislodge the tears that were making Torrhen's face blurry.

"So - glad," he gasped, his voice growing fainter, "To have - met - you…" His eyelids began to flutter. Then he exhaled, his body growing still.

Rickard Karstark's face paled to snow white, and he reached forward, gathering Torrhen's upper body to him to rest in his lap. He began to rock back and forth, crying, loudly, "My boy…! My boy!"

Hermione shuddered. A long time ago, another man cried the same thing, clutching his own dead son, on a quiet night just as the TriWizard Tournament ended; for Hermione, it was the beginning of four years of horror.

Next to his father, Eddard gave a shuddering gasp and curled in on himself. Hermione, however, just sat there, clutching Torrhen's limp hand and staring vacantly at her friend's slack face.

Then, she was lifted to her feet, two large hands clutching at her and shaking her. Her eyes jerked from Torrhen's body, just as Eddard leaped to his feet, sword at his side, staring at the man who had her dangling off the ground in front of him. He was shouting something in her face, and she tried to focus.

"-dy Hermione! Where's the King?" he must have shouted at her a few times.

Hermione blinked and her eyes refocused on the large man, the Greatjon's angry brown eyes burning into her.

Eddard was on his feet, shouting up at him, "Stop it, Umber! Stop it! Can't you see she's in shock?"

Hermione swallowed, and the Greatjon reluctantly let her down, asking again, this time less loud but just as frantic, "Where's Robb, Hermione?"

Hermione's mouth dropped open and she twisted her head as best she could in Greatjon's arms, and her eyes raked across the men, picking out several she knew, and other bannermen she didn't. There were the Karstarks, and Roose Bolton was dazedly walking towards them in an uneven line, his face paler than normal and a line of blood still weeping from his temple; Greatjon was in front of her, and Daryn was screaming himself hoarse, clutching his arm with one hand where there was a stump from above his elbow. Blackwood and Bracken were working together to help carry someone between them.

Where is he? Where is Robb? she thought, her heart beating frantically as she spun on her heel, looking for the familiar deep red of his hair, the grey of his tunic trimmed with white, his bright blue eyes.

Grey Wind, she found after a moment, limping badly from a long, bleeding cut on his back leg, and
snarling at anyone who got too close, covered in blood and grime, arrows sticking out of his flank.

Robb was not near Grey Wind, nor was he anywhere else.

"Hermione," stressed Greatjon, his own eyes wide as she turned back to him. "Where's Robb?"

Her heart plummeted to the ground as she realized, she didn't know where was he was.

Robb Stark was not with them.

The Portkey was as nauseating as Robb knew it would be, but it was nothing compared to the agony of the stab wound Glover had inflicted on him, and Robb's hand pushed futilely at it. He tried to stem the bleeding, even as he tried to catch his breath. Yet, he only managed to gasp and wheeze.

So he lay there, staring up at the trees, wondering why they looked so strange - he was in the Wolfswood, was he not? Just as he and Hermione had planned with their emergency Portkeys? But something was - wrong. Something was very wrong.

His eyelids began to droop, and black spots crept across his vision as he cooled. So this is where I will die, he thought sluggishly.

Distantly, he could hear something, someone trampling through bushes and on twigs and branches. A light bobbed ahead and he turned his head to focus on it, squinting. Something came close, breaking a nearby branch on the ground but it was on Robb's other side and he no longer had the strength to turn his head. Then, there was a snort and a warm puff of air, and something wet brushed his cheek; there was a lick on his cheek with a rough tongue.

He smiled. Grey Wind.

But just as he slipped into unconsciousness, he heard a strangely accented voice say, "-'ere! Over 'ere, Professor! Back, Fang - back!" and then he knew no more.

END OF PART ONE
Some dialogue from 4x02, "the Lion and the Rose," and 4x06, "the Laws of Gods and Men."

New character introductions require headcanon fancasting: Lady Barbrey Dustin (Bellamy Young), Cley Cerwyn (James Frain), and although we saw Jason Mallister earlier in Part One, I decided on the brilliant Marton Csokas.

To picture what Hermione is wearing:

This is the outfit that Emily Beecham's character, the Widow, wears in *Into the Badlands* for season one.

*Previously, in The Winter Witch:*
By some strange, unexplained magic, Hermione found herself in a world called Westeros. After joining up with Robb Stark, the King in the North, she began helping the Northern lords and the Riverlands lords in their battles against the Lannisters and those who had wronged them. She offered her aid and magic in battle and defense, including finding Robb's younger sister Arya in Harrenhal and bringing her to her brother and mother in Riverrun.

Fighting her feelings for Robb, warring against her desire to return home - to Hogwarts, her universe - Hermione began crafting gifts of a communication mirror and doing what she could to make Robb's rule easier. However, people moved to plot against them: Tywin Lannister, whom she permanently disfigured, slowly going mad the same way his daughter and grandson were; the Freys, angry at her arrival and interference with the King in the North by tying him closer and closer to herself; Lord Varys, the spymaster Spider in King's Landing who has a personal grudge against all magic; and the mysterious M, an unknown figure with an unknown agenda.

At what was supposed to be a peaceful summit of the Northern and Riverlands lords on their journey north to retake the fallen Winterfell and plan the North's defense against the Ironborn raiders, Gregor Clegane and his men attacked them. Hermione, with the help of Sandor Clegane, beat the Mountain in a duel and killed him. Later, under guest rights, the Northern host was attacked again, in the Twins by Lord Walder Frey and his family - including being betrayed by Lord Glover and possibly others. In their escape, Torrhen Karstark died from wounds sustained during the battle, and Robb Stark was nowhere to be found...

---

The Winter Witch

Part Two

II:I

There was a gently falling light snow. It was a constant flutter of thick, fluffy flakes obscuring the path for several hundred yards, blanketing the four riders in a white fog. Several inches of snow covered the ground, and the trees that surrounded them - the thick forest - were bare of their leaves, revealing nothing but brown sticks protruding from a never-ending expanse of white. Several branches groaned heavily under the weight of the snow on them, and every so often, the branches would lose their load. The heavy thump of snow falling in chunks and hitting the ground reached the riders.

Otherwise, the silence of the forest was broken only by the noise of their horse's hooves crunching through the snow that mixed in with hard mud, the soft whumps of their breath and the creak of their riding leather as they shifted in their saddles.

The four riders - three men and one woman - were dressed for the weather. They wore fur-lined cloaks overtop of leather, chainmail, and thick woollen wear; their boots were splattered with mud and laced up to mid-calf with thick soles. Two of the men had beards, and there was a slight dusting of snow - or frost - caught in the dark whiskers. The woman's long, flyaway brown-and-silver hair also was laced with some frost.

There was no one on the path other than them; their target loomed closer and closer as they emerged from the forest, the snow-covered path they were on turned into a churned, harden mud. Around them was a snow-covered field of rolling hills, with some patches of long grass and bushes popping up through the snow sporadically. Many of those were tinged white or dotted with snow.

Ahead, Winterfell - the home of the Starks and Wardens of the North - drew their eyes. The castle
itself sat on top of a hill, overlooking not only the small wood they emerged from but the large, dominating Wolfswood behind it to the north and west. The outer wall, a long grey border, was topped with snow like icing on a cake, and the many square and circular towers each presented a picturesque image of snow-capped mini-mountains.

It would still take the riders several hours to meander from the small wooded forest to the castle, their bones settling in with the chilly air, but they knew that they would not be receiving a warm welcome - there were no Stark colours or banners flying over the towers and ramparts.

Eventually, the four riders reached the massive gates, their slow ride up giving the men on the towers enough time to draw back their arrows and holler down, "Halt! Who goes?"

One of the men, with pale hair and no beard, tilted his head up. His eyes coolly surveyed the men, and without speaking, one gulped. "Beggin' your pardon, Lord Bolton. We didn't see you there."

Roose Bolton let his chin drop down in acknowledgment and the massive doors slowly opened, creaking in the cold. Once they were fully pulled back, Bolton nudged his horse forward. The three others behind him did the same, and together they silently entered the first courtyard off the gate tower.

The space opened up to a large courtyard, the hardened earth flattened by the many feet and grooved where carts and animals walked. Despite being busy, an uneasy silence permeated the crowd that met the four riders. In front of them, on the low steps in front of the castle's main building, stood two people.

A ragged, rowdy-looking young man with tousled black hair, dotted with slowly melting snow, stepped forward with a wide, manic grin. He was all in black, with a leather vest over a dark green woollen sweater. He spread his arms wide as he called a greeting to the riders. "Father! What brings you to Winterfell? Was it my raven? Did you hear the news?"

At his side was a tall, slender woman with thin eyebrows and curly dark brown hair streaked with some silver gathered in a widow's bun atop her head. She stood silently, her hands clasped in front of her long black gown and matching black-fur trimmed cloak.

Bolton gracefully climbed off his horse, his fellow companions copying him so that they stood side-by-side, watching carefully, and looking around the Winterfell courtyard. "When did you send the raven, Ramsay? And to where?"

"To the Twins of course," the man answered, surprise colouring his tone. "Did you not receive it?" He turned to the woman at his side, a challenge in his voice. "Lady Dustin, did they not receive it?"

The woman - Lady Barbrey Dustin - sniffed, cutting her eyes at the young man beside her in all black. There was a scowl on her face as she replied, "And how would I know, Snow?"

Rage overtook Ramsay's features for a moment. He struggled to contain the emotion, and it took several, long, moments of tense silence before he turned back to his father with a grin - although the bared teeth was more like a snarl. "Will you come in, Father?"

Bolton narrowed his eyes and strode forward, up the short steps and pushing ahead of his son as they entered the entrance hall that led into the Great Hall of Winterfell. Almost immediately, he stopped.

The Great Hall was dark, with only the barest of candelabras lit that hung from above, and the wall sconces were dimmed, like the candle had burned long into the night and was at its last wick. There were some Bolton men - fellow bannermen that Roose Bolton knew well - but many were of varying
ages, with pockmarks or abrasions on their faces and mean looks in their eyes as they warily stood to greet their leaders' father.

Bolton cast his eyes around the Hall, not moving as his three other companions remained silent and formed a line behind him.

"Where is the Greyjoy?"

Ramsay, who had strode in confidently after his father, faltered only for a moment. Barbrey Dustin followed, a silent ghost with light steps as she took up a place off to the side of Ramsay, out of direct line of sight of the two men. Ramsay continued walking and stood in front of the head table in the Great Hall, where the Starks traditionally sat during meals.

"Oh, he's in the dungeons," said the young man, waving a hand airily.

"As your prisoner?" Bolton's voice remained even as he spoke. "The North has need for him as a political prisoner. It would be wise to give him a room, meal, and treatment considering he is Balon Greyjoy's heir and remaining son."

Ramsay's face twisted. "A room? That squid betrayed his Stark overlords. What good is it for me to give him something as a reward? He's far more entertaining this way."

Bolton's eyes narrowed, infinitesimally. "What did you do to him?"

Pride shone in Ramsay's face. "I trained him. He was a slow learner, but he learned."

"You flayed him," sighed Bolton, a small, tired sound.

Ramsay shrugged unconcernedly, turning from facing them to reach for a drink from a goblet left on the table. "Peeled a few bits. Removed a few others."

"Again," stressed Bolton, his even tone dipping into frosty. "This is Balon Greyjoy's son and heir."

Ramsay gave a startled, hysteria-tinged laugh, spilling a bit of the drink as he spun to face his father. "We've been flaying our enemies for a thousand years. The flayed man is on our banners. Don't tell me time in the South softened your sensibilities, father!" he sneered at the still silent men and woman behind the Lord of the Dreadfort. "Or have these Northern betrayers softened you?"

There was steel in Bolton's voice as he rejoined, "My banners, not yours. You're not a Bolton; you're a Snow." Rage rippled across Ramsay's face. "And these men and Lady, as you so carelessly say - are Lord Jon Umber, Lord Rickard Karstark, and Lady Maege Mormont."

"Stark supporters?" shock coloured Ramsay's voice, and his eyes narrowed suspiciously on them, just as his men stirred around and stood straight, or sat up from where they lounged. A few brave ones drew their swords from sheaths. Barbrey stiffened, her back going straight and her frowning mouth pressing tightly down into a very thin line. "What are they doing here?"

"Helping me," replied Bolton, gritting his teeth. "Greyjoy is a valuable hostage, not your plaything. I wanted to trade him for Moat Cailin - for safe passage into the North from the South."

Confusion filtered across Ramsay's face. "From the South…? Father, I already asked. Lord Greyjoy refused. Savages have-"

"You sent terms to Balon Greyjoy without my consent?" thundered Bolton, his thin, reedy voice rising for the first time in the conversation enough that it startled his illegitimate son.
"Y-You made me Acting Lord of the Dreadfort," he stuttered, taking a small step back in the face of his father's fury. "I acted."

There was the making of a small snarl on Bolton's face. "I did not. I asked a simple task for you, which was to clear the Northern lands of any Ironborn and to take revenge on the attack Theon Greyjoy made against Robb Stark! I needed Theon. I needed him whole."

Two bright splotches of red appeared on Ramsay's cheeks. "That Stark pup was our enemy! Theon was our enemy. But Reek? Reek will never betray us."

"You're calling him Reek?" Bolton reached up to pinch his nose, breathing deeply and heavily through an exhale. "I placed far too much trust in you."

"Trust?" echoed Ramsay, regaining his confidence to take a step forward, his hands shaking at his side. "You sent a raven with instructions to clear Winterfell of the Ironborn with Dustin and Ryswell. I did so! You wanted Theon Greyjoy as a prisoner. I made it happen!" His voice rose with each admission. "We received a raven with news that Tywin Lannister had something planned to kill Robb Stark - or at least, severely wound him if rumours are true - when he reached the Freys at the Twins. All we had to do was hold Winterfell and the Boltons would be Wardens of the North once more! The true Kings of Winter! And I did!"

Bolton shut his eyes at the ringing confession his son shouted out.

"Oh, Ramsay," he sighed. "You utter, complete, fool."

No sooner than Bolton's voice finished, did a cold breeze sweep the room and extinguish the too little flickering lights in the Great Hall.

"What-?" Ramsay stuttered out.

In the darkness, there was the sound of the men - Ramsay's - drawing their swords and standing in the uneasy silence for a few tense heartbeats. And then -

"What the-?!"

A shining whip of blue flame erupted in the dark. It highlighted the pale, horrified face of one of Ramsay's men, just as it caught him, cutting through him horizontally and splitting him in two; just as quickly, the flame disappeared.

There was a quick sequence of multiple pops, loud cracks followed by several screams, timed very suspiciously to bright red jets of light that appeared from different parts of the room.

A gurgle near Ramsay was accompanied by the wet rasp of blood clogging someone's throat as they tried to breathe.

And silence.

With the same cold breeze, light returned to the Great Hall - but this time, all the candles were lit; the Hall burst into bright, warm light that was antithetical to the scene before the four riders. The men who had drawn their swords lay scattered where they stood. A few were ripped in two, without a drop of blood as their wounds had cauterized from the bright flaming whip. Others had their throats slashed, but the cut was clean, cleaner than any blade, and the last man had a giant icicle pushing up through his chest, having burst from the floor. That man was hanging limply over the slowly melting ice, the water mixing with the dark red of his blood.
Lady Barbrey was trembling, eyes wide and her mouth open in a silent scream - the very voice was stolen from her - as she yanked and frantically pulled on the heavy, frozen fabrics of skirts where ice encased her up to her knees, holding her in her spot by the head table. She kept darting her eyes around the room, from the dead, bloodied bodies to Ramsay.

Ramsay, however, was entire frozen except for his head, ice hanging off him and thick. His eyes darted back and forth frantically as he took stock of his men in the room; those Bolton men who had not drawn their swords stood just as frozen, but that was by pure terror.

Standing in front of him was a young woman with bright amber eyes and thick, curly brown hair half-pulled back, and the rest cascading down her back. She wore a strange outfit: a black overcoat with long sleeves and an open v-neck that revealed a shiny and tight grey undershirt. The coat itself was unique that it split open at the front of the woman's waist, encircled by a wide belt. The coat was trimmed with grey fur - wolf fur. Underneath the coat, she had tight black trousers, like a man, and matching black boots that ended at her knees.

She had a wooden stick in the palm of one hand, and Ramsay knew instantly who she was. That, and her expression, sent chills down Ramsay's spine.

"W-Witch," he stuttered, from the cold (and not fear, his mind stubbornly whispered). His lips were beginning to tinge blue.

"Ramsay Snow," the woman began, her voice cool.

Familiar rage suffused the man, and it warmed his chilled blood - but only just. Irrational hate overrode any potential of common sense. "Tell me, witch - how fares Robb Stark? Where is the Wolf King now?"

Something flickered in her expression, and she raised her wand. A wordless spell burst from it, sailing through the air and hitting Ramsay's right arm, covered in ice. It shattered, splitting off into tiny specks of snow-dust. The temperature from the ice froze Ramsay's limb to the point that shattering also removed it, leaving the wound frozen shut, preventing blood loss.

Ramsay howled. "YOU CUT OFF MY ARM! YOU TORE IT OFF! YOU DID THIS!"

"You betrayed Robb."

He looked up, tears in his eyes as he tried to process the cool voice. Then, he snarled, "I would do it again, you bit-"

Another spell and his other arm encased in ice shattered. Ramsay began cursing, screaming, spittle flying from his mouth.

"I have two more limbs to go; it would be best if you answered my questions," said the witch.

Barbrey, also encased, had tears streaming down her pale cheeks; and although no one could hear her, she was hiccupping, gasping for air and on the verge of a panic attack as she watched the witch coolly dismember Ramsay Snow in Winterfell's Great Hall while the man's father stood by and watched.

"Lord Karstark, Lord Umber," directed Bolton quietly without turning his eyes from the spectacle in front of him, "Please bar the doors from anyone entering."

The two men silently did as told, turning on their boots and moving to the door, which had already been shut after Ramsay entered it to keep the cold out. However, they dropped a heavy wooden
"What? What do you want to know?" he snapped through his pain, pale eyes staring her down.

"Why did you take Tywin Lannister's offer?"

Ramsay snarled. "Why not? The Boltons used to be Kings! We could've been kings again!"

He directed the last part at his father. Behind the witch, Bolton stepped forward, until he was just an arm's length behind her, at her right. The curly-haired witch turned her head towards her shoulder, slightly, although her eyes never left the man encased in ice.

She spoke directly to the young black-haired bastard. "Who else was involved in the conspiracy? You - Lady Dustin-" Barbrey's already pale face went snow-white and she swayed in her spot. "Who else?"

When Ramsay just stared mulishly at her, she raised her wand again and cast the same spell, this time hitting his left leg. Ramsay's scream rang from the rafters, his entire body's weight balanced on his remaining limb and precariously teetering. He remained upright only due to the stiff, thick ice.

"Father!" cried Ramsay, tears on his face as well as snot. "Father - please!"

"Ramsay," said the man quietly. "Who else?"

"I don't know!"

"Ramsay."

"I don't know! I don't! By the Old Gods, I don't!"

The witch sighed. "I have one more leg, but I don't fancy the idea of shattering his chest to pieces once that fails."

At the threat, Ramsay's wet breaths shuddered.

She raised her wand once more.

And Ramsay blurted, "The Freys! Ryswell! Vypren! Glover! Dustin! We were all given orders, ravens from King's Landing. From the Old Lion!"

The young woman lowered her wand slowly until the tip pointed at the floor. Ramsay let out a heavy sigh of relief.

*It's nearly over, he thought. I'm safe.*

"Is that all?" asked his father, coolly.

Ramsay nodded, bobbing his head quickly. "Yes - Yes, that's all. I swear."

Bolton paused for a moment and then dipped his head. "Very well."

He turned from his son, removing his eyes from him for the first time since they entered the room. He faced the black-dressed witch, and said, quietly, "As you will it, my Lady."

"Father - what -" but Ramsay never learned why his father turned from him. Why he turned to look
at the strange magical woman, who raised her wand one last time and said in a fury-tinged voice, "Reducto."

Hermione burnt the remains of the dead while Barbrey, nearly catatonic in shock, watched. The stench was growing familiar, but a blast of wind swept it away, out the now open doors. Although some acrid smell lingered, the Great Hall in Winterfell was free - liberated - once more from those who didn't want it preserved for the Starks.

She stood under one large candelabra, interlocking silver and pewter chains, looking around the large hall, slightly lost now that she disposed of Ramsay - one of the collaborators who orchestrated the attack at the Twins. Bolton moved to her side, watching her carefully.

Hermione sighed. "I'm sorry about your son."

"Domeric was my son. Ramsay killed him."

Hermione turned to face the older man. His face remained stoic, but in the tightness next to his eyes and the dull colour to them, she read his pain. "I'm still sorry."

He inclined his head, hands clasped behind his back. Maege and Karstark walked up to them, Umber barely a step behind. He was shaking snow from his shoulders and hair.

"I sealed the main gates," the large man announced. "Made those inside the courtyard skittish as a new foal, but I figure you can go out and deal with them later, eh, Bolton?"

The man nodded, shortly.

Greatjon sighed, a deep and loud sound that all felt deep in their bones. He cast his gaze around the Hall, looking at it with dismayed eyes. "He was supposed to be here for this."

The mood took a further plunge. Hermione turned her face away and rolled her bottom lip into her mouth, biting down hard on it to stop it from trembling. She squeezed her eyes shut and focused on taking a deep breath.

Robb is a strong King, she told herself. You can be strong in his place. For his people. Until he's back. Do what he would have wanted done.

Turning back to face the others, Hermione cleared her throat. "Right, well. Let's move on, shall we? Lord Bolton, if you and Lord Umber could gather those remaining and... I suppose see if they are more Ramsay's men than yours?"

The two men nodded and left.

"Lady Mormont, Lord Karstark," Hermione turned to the two others, the latter stood a bit straighter at being spoken to, "Let's gather the servants and see if we can get some guest rooms and a meal - something simple - prepared. Then, if all goes well, we'll start Portkeying people over and give the clear for the army to move to Winterfell."

Maege nodded. "Yes," she said, quirking her thin lips. "Winter is Coming, as the Starks like to say."

She then took off in a direction, which Hermione assumed meant she knew where she was going.

"At once, Lady Hermione," said Karstark, his voice firm. He dipped his head as he left, and spun on his heel in another direction, leaving Hermione alone in the Great Hall.
Winter is Coming, my arse, thought Hermione moodily, meandering down the large center aisle that separated several long wooden tables.

The Great Hall was similar to Hogwarts' Hall layout: there were four long tables vertically parallel to one another, but two on each side of the room separated by the center aisle. The Starks used no dais like others, but rather a long Head table, like Hogwarts. However, the main difference was that at the end of the hall, there were four horizontal smaller rows of tables. Those tables were shrouded partially in darkness due to their somewhat removed location, far from the chandeliers and wall sconces.

While there was no enchanted ceiling above her, or floating candles that dripped wax, or owls delivering mail in the morning, the Winterfell Great Hall felt like home. Tension began to lift from Hermione's shoulders, and she let her hand trail down the smooth wood until she reached the Head table.

She gazed upon it, picking out the main two seats where Eddard and Catelyn Stark would sit; were you on your father's right, Robb? She wondered, her eyes lingering on the empty chair. There's so much I don't know about you right now. Things I wish I did. I wish you were here.

"Lady Hermione?"

Hermione turned at the call, plastering a pleasant, placid look on her face. "Lord Karstark?"

"We're ready to begin the process of moving the injured to Winterfell's courtyard. I believe a few of the other Lords wish to speak to you, about the coming winter and plans to secure the castle," he continued.

Hermione sighed, leaving one last longing look at the table. She then strode down the aisle towards the man. "Very well. I suppose we can safely say that winter is here."

"Indeed, my Lady."

"And where's Theon Greyjoy?" she asked, reaching Karstark's side.

A ripple of disgust spread across Karstark's face. "Dungeons. He's refusing to come out."

Hermione stopped and blinked up at him. "I beg your pardon?"

Karstark looked like he very much wanted to shift uncomfortably, but instead, his mouth turned down into a scowl. "We tried to have some of the Bolton guards pry him out, but he began to scream bloody murder. They dropped him and he retreated to the darkest corner of his cell."

Hermione's eyebrows pinched. "I… see." She shook her head slightly. "Who else is here?"

Thrown by her change in topic, Karstark fumbled for a moment and then sputtered out, "Mallister, and Cerwyn. And of course," he sighed, "Bracken and Blackwood. They wouldn't stay away."

"In the courtyard?"

Karstark nodded, and Hermione began walking back the way they came in, Karstark on her heels. "It's the largest area within Winterfell, even though they Portkeyed in and walked from outside the gates - calling loudly to be let in - they just decided not to wait."

Hermione tossed a small grin at Karstark. "Can you blame them? Or anyone else? We've been planning this for weeks now. And that broken tower could barely suffice to keep any of us warm and
Karstark sighed. "Yes - but -"

Out in the courtyard, the four men whom Karstark named stood in a row, although they were facing different directions. Bracken and Blackwood were looking towards Hermione when she exited the Great Hall, but Cerwyn was barking orders to the small collection of guards he brought along with him, as, having visited Winterfell before and being a nearby Lord, he knew the area; whereas Mallister stood calmly, with his hands clasped behind his back as he coolly surveyed the gently fluttering Bolton banners hanging off the ramparts.

Bracken spoke first, loudly, drawing their attention. "Lady Hermione!"

Hermione, pleased to see a friendly face, smiled. "Lord Bracken." She turned to the others. "Lord Blackwood, Lord Mallister, Lord Cerwyn. Welcome to Winterfell. As you can see, Lady Mormont and Lords Bolton, Umber, and Karstark were successful."

"Excellent news, my Lady," greeted Clay Cerwyn, his riotous black curls bobbing as he inclined his head to her in respect. "Should we send a message back to the others to arrive?"

Hermione turned to Karstark. "It's your decision, Lord Karstark. Is Winterfell habitable for what remains of our army?"

He nodded, slowly and thoughtfully, his gaze turned inward. "Yes... I believe so. There might be some changes we need to address as they occur, but we can start moving people into Winterfell."

Turning back to Cerwyn, Hermione said, "Can I borrow some of your men, Lord Cerwyn?"

The man's narrow face lengthened as he frowned. "Of course… but why…?"

"Theon Greyjoy is in the dungeons and the Bolton men can't get him out without him being scared of them," she replied shortly.

Understanding dawned on his face, and shortly thereafter, Karstark was leading Hermione to the dungeons with four Cerwyn men-at-arms behind her. The lower they went, the damper the air became, and the outside autumn chill that teased of a bitter winter began to make itself known far underground. The very breath from their lungs turned frosty with each step they took down long, winding stairs until they opened to the dungeons proper, jail cells on either side.

One cell had several slobbering, snarling dogs with matted fur, barking loudly at them as they strode past. Their eyes were wild and their muzzles bloody and Hermione's stomach turned at the thought of what Ramsay kept them for.

Other cells were occupied with shivering, huddled figures in torn and dirty clothes. The scent of unwashed bodies, urine, and others had Hermione wandlessly and nonverbally casting a Bubblehead charm, filtering out the smells for fresh air.

There seemed to be some spell - not a real one, but a presence - meant to keep people from talking, as the small group kept silent until they reached another cell, where a single Bolton guard was staring into its depths with a scowl on his hardened face.

"He still hasn't moved?" asked Karstark as they approached, his voice modulated to keep slightly hushed.

The Bolton guard shook his head. "He's stopped whimpering and crying now, milord, but if I take a
Hermione peered into the gloom, trying to spot Theon Greyjoy. What did he look like? Was he another Draco Malfoy, tall and arrogant, with a pointy chin and smirk on his lips as he watched his chaos? Was he at all bitter at what he did, how he betrayed Robb? Or - according to the guards - was he a shell of a man who was once that way?

In the meantime, Karstark had dismissed a very relieved Bolton guard, who quickly disappeared back up the dungeon steps. Curiosity overtook Hermione and she stepped up to the door of the cell, its metal gate swung open inwards. Scattered hay on the floor mixed with brown spots of mouse droppings and Hermione nudged at some of it with the toe of her boot.

"Lights, men?" she requested, and two Cerwyn guards grabbed nearby torches from the wall sconces and held them up and aloft.

The light spilled into the cell, and, then, eventually, Hermione spied the huddled figure in the far corner, curled protectively around itself. The light hit on scuffed brown boots; stained trousers and what was once a green shirt but was now torn and bloody, as well as loose on the man's frame.

Hermione stepped forward, one Cerwyn guard following just a step behind so that the torch lit on the man's face. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, his golden-brown hair was greasy and lank, and there was a beard, a shade darker than his hair, covering his chin and cheeks. There was gauntness to his face, sickly pale, which Hermione did not like.

"Theon?" she asked.

The man whimpered and curled tighter.

Hermione inched forward, and when the guard attempted to, she waved him off without moving her eyes from the Greyjoy heir. "Theon, Ramsay is dead. You have nothing to fear from him anymore."

There was a shuffle behind her, and Hermione could picture in her mind Karstark's silent scoff and eye roll - the North would likely want retribution but Hermione wanted answers first.

At Ramsay's name, Theon shuddered violently. He began mumbling something under his breath.

"Theon?"

"No! No! You can't trick me!" he muttered, his voice high pitched and coming out quick. "I'm Reek! Reek!"

Hermione frowned. Reek? She mouthed in confusion.

"Trick you? Trick you, how?"

But Theon reached up and grabbed fistfuls of his hair, clutching at it and shaking his head back and forth. "No! Tell him! Tell him you couldn't trick me!"

"My Lady," began one of the guards, tentatively, "Is he even… all there in the head?"

"By the Gods," muttered another, "What did the Bolton bastard do?"

Hermione ran her eyes over what she could see of Theon's body, and while he was whole, despite what Ramsay implied, it was clear he had been scarred in others way. A cold wave washed over Hermione, and she was vividly reminded of her own torture at Bellatrix's wand. The woman scarred
her eventually, but the phantom pain of the *Cruciatus* didn't leave physical marks and the young witch wondered if Ramsay had been *clever* enough to do something similar.

Theon was still muttering, rocking slightly when Hermione withdrew her wand and snapped out a soft *stupefy*. He blissfully fell silent, but his frame remained tense even when unconscious.

"Let's get him to a bedroom and keep him under constant watch," said Hermione, turning to the two guards not holding the torches. "It's entirely possible he could be suicidal, and I want him kept alive. The spell will last more than long enough for you to bring him upstairs safely."

The two Cerwyn guards nodded their understanding and shuffled into the cell, lifting Theon between them and then quickly disappeared, following her orders.

"You plan to keep him alive?" asked Karstark quietly, as the guards holding the torches returned them to their sconces.

Hermione nodded, that cold wave burning through her. "One, to learn what happened when he sacked Winterfell, and then to learn why he betrayed Robb."

Karstark nodded in satisfaction, although Hermione knew he was eager for more justice. She was the last out of the cell. Karstark faced forward, looking towards any perceived danger coming down their only route back up to the main levels of Winterfell. He was ready to fall into step alongside, or as he and the other Lords had been doing lately, just behind her as she emerged from the cell.

As they walked past the braying dogs, Hermione turned to Karstark and said calmly - although every bit furious and hiding it -, "We should also have someone come down here and deal with those, as well."

"Yes, my Lady."

Neither looked back, but if they had - they would have noticed the dogs' whimpers and them falling silent, and have seen the creeping frost and ice that built up in Theon's old cell. They would have seen the trail of glittering ice that followed them to the stairs, only to quickly turn to water, leaving nothing but wet spots on an already damp stone floor.
Three months earlier...

Robb's eyes fluttered as he came to, a slight moan escaping his lips. His body felt sore, but he wasn't dead - so that was a positive. His eyes opened and he took in the bright, light and airy space; his hand, lying at his side, smoothed over incredibly soft fabric.

He was on a small bed, with a strange metal frame. There were white curtains around him, but not from a poster bed; they were just fabric dividers between himself and, as he turned his head, to the empty bed next to him. There were four other beds to his right, reaching the end of the room. There, a large open window gave a tantalizing glimpse of beyond. The sun was shining, there was a mountain range in the distance, and he could see the gently shifting leaves of trees in full summer bloom. The air that wafted in from outside was warm and sweet, and there were calls of birds chirping and singing.

Outside the ward he was in, it was the throes of summer; but when he was at the Twins for the summit, reports of snowfall in the North had trickled in from the White Harbour. Had he lost that much time?

Robb turned his head to the left this time and nearly startled himself off the bed. A young, lean man with messy black hair was slumped in a chair at his table's side, his chin touching his chest as soft snores escaped him every so often. His arms were crossed, and his legs were straight in front of him, one ankle resting on the other.

His clothes were the oddest, Robb decided, eyeing him warily. He had blood red over robes, which were open and pooling on the floor, but underneath he wore a nicely pressed black tunic of some sort with buttons running up the middle tucked into his trousers, which were similar to Lady Hermione's "jeans."

"Poppy! Madame Pomfrey!" a voice across from Robb called loudly, and the man snorted and then was immediately out of his seat, emerald eyes wide behind strange circular frames and a wand in his hand as he scanned for danger, "The man is awake! As is Auror Potter!"

The man - Auror Potter - turned to Robb, who remained on the bed, warily eyeing him back. There was something familiar about the man, something that had Robb thinking he had seen him before or heard his name before, but as far as he knew, there were no Potters in the North or the Riverlands.

Robb turned back to the male voice that called for the Maester, and Robb's eyes went wide as he realized the call came from a large portrait of a man in a lime green robe next to a cauldron. Auror Potter's eyes followed his, and he stifled a laugh.

"Yeah, the portraits move," he said with a soft sigh. He ran a hand through his messy hair, making it worse, just as a woman in white robes over a strangely scandalous white dress that ended at her knees appeared behind one of the cloth partitions. She was much older, with a shock of white, curly hair pulled neatly back from her face. She too was carrying a wand.

"Mr. Potter," she admonished, "You were to call me when our patient awoke."
"He was asleep!" helpfully called the man in the portrait, causing the woman to glare at the man.

Potter looked sheepish and dipped his head, grinning up at the woman - Madam Pomfrey - who sighed loudly.

"Trouble you are," she said, although fondly. She turned back to Robb, waving her wand over him. Having spent time with Hermione, he didn't move, but he did tense slightly. Potter noticed this.

"Been around magic, have you?" he questioned, eyes narrowing.

"You carry wands," said Robb unnecessarily. "Like Lady Hermione?"

The man tensed and Madame Pomfrey stopped waving her wand over his body. Robb swallowed.

"Lady Hermione?" repeated Potter, a steely note in his voice.

Robb nodded, slowly. "This…" he looked around, taking in the high ceilings but the moving portraits, the wands in Potter and Pomfrey's hands, the strange thrum in the air, and finished, "This is Hogwarts, is it not?"

Potter and Pomfrey shared a glance. Potter then said, "It is. How do you know that?"

"Lady Hermione told me about it," said Robb cautiously, the memories coming to him quickly now. Auror Potter was Harry Potter, one of Hermione's best friends.

"And where is Lady Hermione now?" snapped Potter, leaning forward over the bed to lean close to Robb's face. "What have you done with her? Where is she? If you've hurt her-!"

"Mr. Potter!" snapped Pomfrey, physically shoving him back from the bed. "If you wouldn't mind saving your inquisition of my patient until after I make sure he's healed from that rather horrid stab wound…!"

"Healed?" asked Robb, glancing down at his stomach.

The woman sniffed. "Yes - utterly barbaric Muggle weapons. Hagrid - our groundskeeper - found you and brought you to us right away. I was able to stop the bleeding and patch you up easily, although you might need a good day or so before your muscles don't seize. You'll be a bit sore, anyway."

Potter, at the side, had his arms crossed and scowled deeply. "Are you done, Madam Pomfrey?"

The woman whirled on him and scolded, "Don't you take that tone with me, Harry Potter! I've seen you in here more often than I liked over the years, and while I always healed you up, I won't hesitate to stick you in one of these beds, either!"

Cowed, the man mumbled a contrite sorry as Robb said, slowly, "Harry Potter? Hermione's best friend?"

As Pomfrey left, muttering under her breath, Potter turned to face Robb and nodded. His tone was still distrustful and there was anger, but he seemed to be controlling himself when he asked, "Yeah. Who're you?"

Robb shifted, not wanting to have this conversation flat on his back. There was a twinge of discomfort around his middle, but nothing that suggested he was bleeding out or nearly died. "Robb Stark," he said, debating to add 'King in the North,' but ultimately deciding against it.
"And how do you know Hermione?"

"She's-" Robb bit off the sentence.

What could he say? Hermione was - what? His friend? Certainly. His witch? Undoubtedly; she had done more for him and his cause than an entire army. But she was more than that, else he wouldn't have had Torrhen assigned as her personal guard - she was someone precious to him. He wanted more than friendship from her, without a doubt, and he was currently looking for a way out of the Frey alliance his mother had brokered - although, he thought darkly, with them breaking guest rights at the summit, I am definitely free of them for good.

"She's what?" asked an increasingly frustrated Harry Potter.

"She's just… her," he finished lamely. "My friend, I suppose."

Harry sighed and collapsed into the chair he was in previously, and Robb winced at the graceless move, at the slouch the man presented. Maester Luwin and his father would've had his hide for it.

Harry had his head in his hands, breathing heavily. Robb saw a faint tremor in the man's shoulders, as though he was struggling to control his emotions.

"Where is she?" asked Harry finally, quietly.

"Most likely with the rest of the army," answered Robb, just as quietly, causing Harry's head to snap up. "In the Wolfswood, if the Portkey worked properly." At Harry's look, he elaborated, "We all had the same Portkey. The fact that I am not… where I should be, makes me hesitant that she's where she should be."

"Where's this Wolfswood?" asked Harry. "Somewhere here in Britain?"

"Britain?" echoed Robb. "Um - no. Lady Hermione mentioned she was from a different universe…”

Harry swore under his breath and mumbled something uncomplimentary about a man named Dumbledore. He turned his emerald eyes on Robb and asked, sternly, "Then how did you get here?"

"I'm not sure," said Robb.

"How did Hermione get to your world?" pressed Harry, his voice hard.

Robb shook his head. "I'm not sure."

"Approximately, answered Robb warily, watching the man pace and the edge of his robe snap sharply at his turns.

"Is she safe? Is she okay?" bit out Harry. "You mentioned an army - yours, I take it? Has she been fighting? Was she hurt?"

"Lady Hermione is as safe as she can be," replied Robb, miffed at the idea of him not taking care of the woman he felt deeply for. "And while she has been in a few battles, her magic protects her and when it cannot, the guard I assigned her - my friend and loyal subject - does the rest. She's spent most of her time in the library at Riverrun searching for a way back here, or with me, counselling me and my men."
A stricken look spread over Harry's face as he stared at Robb. "Then how do we get her back?"

Robb turned his face from Harry, feeling a sharp pang in his chest as he softly said, "I don't know," just as he wondered, how do I get back?

Out of a collective Northern and Riverlands army that totalled 25,000 men, 8000 of those remained behind at Riverrun as a reserve. 5000 had been split from the original host further north through the Neck to bypass the Twins, and 6500 of those that remained of the original army number had perished at the Twins in the surprise attack between the Freys, the Glovers, the Dustins, the Vyprens, and the Mountain's men, all thanks to the careful planning of the Freys and Lannisters, and poor timing.

Barely 5500 men remained.

A quarter of those were injured and no one was sure if they'd be battle-ready ever again.

Of the 4000 that remained from that, most were mere handfuls under missing commanders, such as Wendel Manderly; or they were Lords with less than a handful of men, like Cley Cerwyn, who wandered around with a vacant look on his bloody face.

On top of it, both Catelyn Stark and Robb Stark were missing. Along with them, the Smalljon Umber, Wendel Manderly, Blackwood's son Lucas, and Patrek Mallister, all representatives of their houses, were missing as well. The other member of the Kingsguard, Dacey, was unaccounted for, and Olyvar Frey, Robb's squire, had been tied up and guarded day and night, by virtue of being a Frey.

And in the midst of it all, Hermione sat around her dining table in her tent, liberated from her precious beaded bag, staring vacantly at the map of Westeros she and Robb used to keep track of his family. Her eyes were on the remaining splotches: Arya was at Riverrun, luckily, under Edmure and Brienne's watchful eyes; Sansa was still in King's Landing, and Bran was north of the wall, moving westward for some strange reason. Rickon's dot remained at Skagos. The dot of blood that represented Robb Stark was unmoving at the Twins, a burned black mark - not dead, as the blood would have disappeared - unable to be found on a map of Westeros.

Eddard stood behind her, a silent sentry continuing his brother's work, while his father Lord Karstark shouted himself blue in the face at the Greatjon. She had luckily cast *muffliato* before the men began ripping into each other, talking over one another while Roose Bolton quietly tried to interject some words, but was ignored.

The remaining men who hovered outside around her green canvas tent didn't need to know just how desperate and broken their leaders were.

"-what are we going to do now, huh?" the Greatjon roared. "We need the King!"

"That's what I've been telling you!" roared back Karstark, "We can send out search parties for him!"

"Where? Back to the Freys, those murderous bastards?" spat Greatjon, turning and stabbing a pointed finger at Roose when he spoke next. "Or perhaps east, towards Winterfell which was taken by that one's bastard?"

"I did *not* tell him to do that," growled the pale man.

Greatjon rolled his eyes. "Oh, aye - he and Lady Barbrey Dustin thought it up themselves, did they? Let's take Winterfell, they thought - after all, it's no secret in the North that the Boltons have wanted
Winterfell ever since they were cut down by the Stark kings of old!"

"You can accuse Lord Bolton all you want, Umber, but know that I too could just as easily fit that being a cadet branch of the Stark family," snarled Karstark, "And yet I have done nothing but show my loyalty to King Robb, as has Bolton!"

"Well, let's ask just what you were planning with the man then?" snarled Greatjon Umber, eyes flashing and his face red. "Did you continue to slip information to Glover with those extra parchments you wanted and were given?"

"How dare you," hissed Karstark, vibrating in his anger.

The flap to the tent opened and Lord Tytos Blackwood and Lord Jonos Bracken walked in, still in their bloodied armour three days later, both with weary looks upon their faces.

"Are they still at it?" asked Blackwood, reaching for the free chair next to Hermione and sitting heavily in it. Bracken took the seat next to him, which was also next to Bolton.

The pale man with thinning hair sighed. "Unfortunately. They won't listen to anything anyone says."

"- and what about Lady Hermione?" shouted Greatjon. "It was her magic that we relied on! It could just as easily be her fault!"

"Hey now-!" shouted Bracken, leaping to his feet, just as Eddard had his sword out and pointed at Umber before the man's words ended, his voice ringing in the silence in the tent.

Hermione, finally, looked up from the map to stare at the large giant of a man with deadened eyes.

"It's entirely possible," she said tonelessly, "That I messed something up in the spell. But it wouldn't make sense that only one was off from an entire bunch, especially as Robb and I took the trip several times to make sure the space was large enough for everyone."

With that, the bluster left Umber and he collapsed into the chair closest to him, Karstark still tense and preferring to stand.

"Then where is he?" muttered Umber.

"He's alive," said Hermione, eyes slipping back to the map, at Robb's dot. "We know that much. But according to this - he's not in Westeros."

"Could - Could he," started Bracken tentatively, "Could he be where you come from, Lady Hermione?"

Hermione frowned. "I - I suppose…"

"What good does knowing where King Robb is?" groused Blackwood, leaning back in his chair. "It doesn't help us now. Without him, the army is leaderless unless we send parties out to bring back Bran or Rickon. And even then, they're too young to lead."

"Robb's will dictated that if he were indisposed, Arya would be the next leader," said Hermione, turning to the man at her other side.

"Princess Arya?" asked Blackwood, disbelief in his voice, but at Hermione's glower, he hastily backtracked, "Well, I suppose she's vicious enough and quite proficient with a sword…"

Hermione sighed. "She's still quite young. Robb wanted several of us to help her fall into a
leadership role."

But she's not Robb, she finished the thought mentally. The rest seemed to have heard the thought because many slouched or slumped in their seats. There was a heaviness in the air as those around the dining table began to realize just what they lost with Robb's disappearance.

Hermione shivered as the air around her significantly cooled and chilled.

"Can we even keep the Northern army together?" whispered Karstark through bloodless lips.

"Not without the King," rumbled Umber, bowing his head into his hands on the table.

Merlin, what are we going to do? she thought, bringing a hand up to bite her nail. Behind her, Karstark began pacing the length of the living and dining area. We moved back towards the Twins because Robb wanted to return to the North and retake Winterfell. He had made his point about the Lannisters but had other priorities. The North is a priority. We need to re-establish the chain of command.

Her eyes darted to the bundle of letters Robb had left in her tent, the communications between him and his half-brother Jon, the new Commander of the Night's Watch. And make sure that they get the help they need… if what Jon wrote is true…

"We have him," said Hermione suddenly, coming to a decision.

"I beg your pardon?" stuttered Karstark, turning to face her. "How?"

Hermione looked up. "A few options: Polyjuice potion, which, using a piece of hair from Robb from his comb - I know it's still at Riverrun - we can use it and someone can pretend to be Robb for an hour. Alternatively, I can cast a glamour on someone, but I'd have to be there to reapply it every so often. A glamour lasts longer than Polyjuice, though…"

She trailed off, a thoughtful look on her face, leaning back in her chair. "Or we can say he was badly wounded in the escape, and it will give us a few months' time to avoid showing his face in public. Then we can use Polyjuice or a glamour."

Glancing around the table and at their stupefied faces, Hermione said, testily, "It buys us time."

"Time for what?" asked Bolton, eyes dark as he stared at her.

"Until we can get Robb back," said Hermione firmly, looking at each of the men in the eye. "As long as we keep morale up, as long as we maintain his ideals, we can manage. We have Arya - yes, she's young and untrained - but we can help her. We can all take turns being around her and teaching her. She ought to know this anyway."

"And what of those who seek to harm us?" asked the Greatjon lowly. "Once they know that King Robb is missing-!"

"Well, he won't be then," retorted Hermione sharply, glaring up at him. "We'll use Polyjuice then, where he can lead men in battle. The rest of the time, we'll contain the information that he is missing."

"How?" asked Karstark, his lips trembling.

Hermione's brain raced as she pondered ideas. "A jinx on the men, or a taboo like what Voldemort had in place whenever someone said his name during the war - I can cast it. It'll stop anyone from
speaking of Robb's disappearance, especially if it's keyed into that thought."

The despair around the room was lifting. It was not entirely gone - many of them were still feeling the loss of many of the Northern and Riverland army - but they weren't in as a dire situation than they were. The chill that had come over the room earlier was lifting as well, and the crackle of the flame in the fireplace seemed to grow louder, more comforting in response.

"This..." began Bolton, slowly, "Could work. It just might."

"But who will be in charge?" asked Bracken, glancing around. "Although His Grace's will was clear about who would help Princess Arya, every minor or hedge Lord, as well as Great Houses, will be vying for the position as King's regent - ah, in this case, a Princess's regent. We'd all have to watch our backs."

"No one person should be in charge," said Hermione firmly, looking around the room and meeting everyone's eyes. "That wouldn't be fair and someone could easily usurp Robb's position."

Karstark looked around. "Maybe... a Great Council?"

"A what?" asked Hermione.

While Hermione was confused by the name, the others in the room had various looks of disbelief (Bolton and Eddard), outright hostility (the Greatjon), or confusion (Bracken and Blackwood).

Karstark nervously cleared his throat, eyes darting around the room. "A Great Council. It the early days of the North, before even the Kings of Winter, there were numerous families that were monarchical. Those who formed alliances created a Great Council, each with a representative for a seat; a single High King was chosen as a final deciding vote. Once the Kings of Winter emerged and subjugated the families, they initially kept the Great Council, giving those loyal to them a voice. Those were the first Great Houses."

Hermione frowned. This sounds familiar...

The Greatjon scoffed, his arms crossed. His beard nearly vibrated with the intensity of his tense jaw underneath the hair as he grit out, "The Great Council is a sack of piss idea, Karstark. The original Great Council had barely six or seven men on it, along with the High King. We've over a hundred Lords. Are they all going to get a say?"

"Well - I don't know - No - I thought -" sputtered Karstark, looking at Umber and then around the table, particularly at Bolton whose look of shock had turned into quiet calculation, hoping the man would aid him.

"What's next?" grumbled the Greatjon, sarcasm in his voice. "Would we all sit at a round table and pledge ourselves to an empty throne? How would we decide what the Council would promote in laws, or rule?"

A round table, Hermione thought, latching onto the words as a hysterical laugh bubbled up her throat. She clamped her mouth shut in a long, thin line as she struggled to contain her mirth. But something slipped out, and as Bracken looked at her, eyes wide, Hermione could no longer keep quiet.

She laughed until her ribs aches, tears streaming down her face. She leaned back in her chair, imagining the Greatjon Umber in the white tunic of the Holy Grail knights and bucket head chainmail, and worse, someone like Bolton following him with a pair of coconuts.
"Has she lost her mind?" muttered someone at the table, as she struggled to remove images of Monty Python's *Holy Grail* film from her mind. Leaning over the table slightly, Hermione sucked in deep breaths and then used the palm of her hands to wipe at her tear-stained cheeks.

"I think-" she croaked out, before trying again, her voice only wobbling a little, "I think that's a great idea."

"You do?" asked Umber, blinking in shock.

Hermione nodded, and the more she thought about it, the more she warmed to the idea. "Yes - a Great Council of the Lords and Ladies of the North and the Riverlands. Joined, working together, for the betterment of their lands. The north has strict beliefs towards things, does it not?"

Bolton, Karstark, and Umber shared looks and then Karstark was slowly nodding. "Ah, yes - I suppose there are rules that we all intrinsically follow -"

"Those who follow the Faith of the Seven have knights and knighthoods," interrupted Blackwood curiously, "With vows of honour and pledges of allegiance to a Lord…"

Hermione's lips twitched. "Commit no treason; give mercy unto him who asks; do not take up battles in wrongful quarrels for love or worldly goods."

Blackwood eyed Hermione shrewdly. "Yes, quite."

"The North does that without such vows," interjected Karstark with a nasty look to Blackwood for his interruption. "But how do you know these, Lady Hermione?"

"We have stories of great knights and round tables, too," she said, lips twitching at the popular myth of her homeworld country, "Who followed and believed in a code of chivalry and honour."

"What happened to these knights?" asked Bracken curiously, leaning towards her, over the table.

Hermione turned her eyes to him, and said, quietly, "They were just stories. They never existed; not until I came here, anyway."

There was a compliment in her words, soft-spoken as they were, that made the men around her table straighten.


"With a representative from each House," agreed Karstark, "The best from each one."

"Or all who are left," morosely added Bracken with a sigh. "Organizing this with who remains here at the tower in the Wolfswood is going to be a mess."

"It can wait, now that we know what we're doing," said Hermione, sitting straight in her seat as plans came together. "Instead, let's talk about needs to be done next: retaking Winterfell, like Robb had planned. A Great Council can convene when we're there and have the available space."

"We need more people to retake Winterfell," argued Umber, finally back to a conversation topic he could participate in and enjoy. "We have too many wounded. The tower is in desperate need of repairs, and it's likely that men will end up starved at this rate."

"Then we need more men," agreed Bracken. "Can we recall those who remained at Riverrun? And what of Lady Mormont and Lords Darry and Forrester? They avoided the Twins entirely and ended
up at Greywater March with Lord Reed."

"They would bolster our numbers," agreed Karstark. "Do we have ravens? Did they have Portkeys? Surely news of the Twins is making its rounds."

"That's another thing we need to do," interjected Hermione, causing everyone to look at her. "We need to start controlling the flow of information. There absolutely cannot be any rumours that Robb is dead or that we suffered a devastating defeat."

"We can send someone back to Riverrun," suggested Blackwood slowly, "Or use the parchments to convey what's happened. Take a census of who survived or their status if no one has done it yet."

"I think I saw Lord Cerwyn trying," said Bolton. "If only to keep busy since most of his men were outside the Hall when the slaughter began. He's lost most of those who came with him South."

"Hos is around - he survived the massacre," replied Blackwood, a touch of proud parental gleam in his eyes, "And he's good with numbers. With spare rolls of parchment, he can aid Cerwyn. Between the two of them, they'll have a working census of who is injured or who is missing by the end of the week."

"Good," said Umber. "That'll give us accurate numbers and a starting place for where we stand in terms of lost command."

"And who is likely still at the Twins," interjected Karstark darkly.

The mood soured.

"Then before we try retaking Winterfell, we need to free our people," said Hermione, glancing at the map on the table, at the Twins and its location surrounded by the Trident. An idea began to form.

Bracken's mouth turned down grimly. "Not the easiest feat. There's a reason why there are two towers - it splits forces."

"They'll pick us off, one by one, if we try an assault," agreed Blackwood thoughtfully, stroking his beard. "And we hardly have the numbers for such an assault, too."

"Who said anything about a visible attack?" countered Hermione, a gleam in her brightly-lit amber eyes.

"Milady?" asked Karstark slowly.

"Let's just say, with magic, there are far more opportunities than there are without it," she began, looking at the men in her tent, one by one and holding their stares. "Such as an attack from the water. Late at night. In which we sneak in and take our revenge."

A bloodthirsty grin swept across Umber's face. He barked a short laugh and he slammed a closed fist down on the table, shaking it. "I'll agree to that! Kill the traitorous bastards as they sleep, one by one!"

Bolton, Bracken, and Blackwood all shared similar looks, one that spoke of bloodlust and vengeance. Hermione could see Eddard, just standing behind her, grip the pommel of his sword tightly, no doubt thinking of the Frey whose sword had caused Torrhen's fatal wound.

"... All of them?" asked Karstark, quietly, something unreadable in his face. "Even the women and children?"
The room paused, and some of the desire for revenge slipped away.

Hermione, however, thought back to the parade of women who served food at the royal table, each in equally low-cut dresses and the way that Black Walder continued to push the marriage on Robb. She thought of the women, some pale-faced and despondent, and others with shrewd looks in their eyes as they stared hungrily at the young king.

"If they knew, then yes," she said quietly. "Then they die, too."

"How would we even be able to know that?" cried Karstark. "The Gods know that I would love to get my hands on the Frey who k-killed T-Torrhen - but what about those children who are too young to have known? Everyone would lie to save their life!"

"Not if they ingest veritaserum," replied Hermione coolly. "We'll take the Twins and kill the guards and any other Frey soldiers we come across. Any women or children deemed as potentially unknowing of the betrayal will be sequestered elsewhere and taken into a room, one by one, where I will give them veritaserum, a truth potion that I can brew. Then we'll know - if they knew."

"And if they did?" asked Bolton, but there was a deceptively light tone to his voice, like he already knew Hermione's answer but wanted to hear her say it.

Hermione turned to him. There was something strange in her face, something otherworldly - in the sharpness to her cheeks, in the point of her chin, or the pale pallor to her skin - and for a brief moment, the men around the table realized that perhaps, just perhaps, being so connected to magic, she wasn't quite as human as them.

But then the moment passed, and while her eyes still were lit by an inner light and her cheeks were flushed, she said, starkly in the coldest voice the men had ever heard her use:

"Then we kill them all."

TBC...
II:III

Chapter Notes

Some torture and violence to come against the Freys. Oh noes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Winter Witch

II:III

Plans to attack the Twins was tentatively scheduled for the next full moon -- which was just over a full month away, having passed recently during the attack. It gave Hermione just enough time to begin brewing veritaserum from her slowly depleting stores of potions ingredients, as well as her to cast the Taboo.

A part of Hermione was sick with the idea of using the Taboo -- something that had been used to actively hunt down fellow Muggleborns during the Second Blood War -- but another part of her realized that it was the best option she had for keeping Robb’s disappearance under wraps. A Fidelius could hide a person or location, but Robb wasn’t physically there; hiding an idea behind the Taboo, something similar if not an extreme version to an Unbreakable Vow, was her only option.

There was no special incantation for the Taboo. Like most advanced magics, it was based on intent (which made it rather woolly, in Hermione’s opinion). There would be no way to know if it worked unless someone tried; and in order for someone to try, there had to be some type of consequence in attempting to break the Taboo.

Hermione decided that the person losing their voice would be the first condition of trying to break it (as she certainly couldn’t Apparate to that person’s location if she were in the middle of something else to shut them up with a stupefy). The second condition would be a modified confundus, similar to a Muggle Repellant, which would cause that person to forget what they were trying to say about Robb’s disappearance. The final condition would be a ping on Hermione’s magic, in which she knew that someone was determined to break the Taboo. She would then remove the memory of Robb from that person, completely, most likely leaving them a drooling mess if they had several in-depth memories of their King. A determined person would probably find a way around the Taboo, but for the moment, it would do.

In between the numerous steps to brewing veritaserum (which included two sleepless nights of intense, timed stirring and ingredient additions), Hermione cast the Taboo, with Karstark, Bolton, and Umber watching. After all -- what proof did they have that her magic would work as described?

She stood just outside the broken tower, which served as the largest meeting space outside her tent. The walls were mouldy and snow had crept in at certain spots; it was drafty and hardly provided shelter from the elements, but they had a fire pit, and it was enough for a launching point as opposed to Riverrun.

Although there were curious gazes cast their way, Cerwyn and Hoster Blackwood kept those around them busy, working through their census of the remaining force; those unable to fight or in need of
medical attention were made note of, and their Portkeys recalibrated by Hermione to send to 
Riverrun. The first batch had already gone earlier that week; the day after those in her tent decided 
their plans, along with Bracken who explained in person what occurred at the Twins to Edmure, 
Arya, and Brienne.

Intent-based, the Taboo was an invisible spell that flowed from her wand, pointed at the nearest 
person (who was Umber, twitching slightly with the point directed at him), and from there, would 
jump and spread until it covered those not only in the North, but south through the Riverlands as 
well, contained by their ward map. Anyone part of the Northern and Riverlands army would be 
affected by a ‘friend of a friend’ -- particularly anyone who spent time around Robb Stark or his 
campaign.

It was an odd spell, being intent based; trying to explain it to those closest to her in the know as 
difficult, but it boiled down to “well, no one in Dorne gives a hoot about Robb Stark beyond the 
outcome of the war, so why would they have knowledge of what happened at the Twins?”, leaving 
the intent-based Taboo to only apply to those ‘in the know’ of the breaking of guest rights and the 
missing King.

Hermione, as the magical being facilitating the spell, was able to see it and watch as the soft grey 
cloud lit up around Umber, who was still shifting uncomfortably (which was quite amusing given 
how large the man was). The spell glowed around the man briefly, like an inner aura coming to the 
forefront, and then sunk into him; then, tendrils reached out and encompassed Bolton and Karstark. 
The same happened to them, an invisible dove grey aura that pulsed once and then sunk into their 
odies, only for more tendrils to reach out to those nearest: Blackwood, his son Hoster, and Cerwyn.

The spell continued, soft, almost insidious, as it travelled from one person to another, and then 
another, all unknown as they couldn’t see the spell work like Hermione could, the effects of the 
Taboo settling into their very soul. Eyeing a cluster of silver-glowing men some distance away, 
Hermione deliberately turned away and fought a shiver.

Within hours, the spell would have caught on everyone in the Wolfswood, and would begin to 
spread southward with anyone using the Portkey or the next batch of wounded sent to Riverrun. By 
the end of the day, perhaps the week, anyone who had knowledge of the Twins (including those 
who planned it, maybe), would be unable to speak, write, or even think of the idea of Robb Stark 
missing.

Those in the know absolutely would not be able to do so; and those who might have a vague idea of 
questioning where their King was, would not speak of their doubts; and those who merely speculated 
would not be able to speculate on a disappearance, but rather a recovery of a wound at the worst.

With a sigh, Hermione lowered her wand and let it slip back into her wrist holster.

“Is it done?” questioned Umber, his voice rumbling across the ground where he stood shock-still, 
eyes darting about for a physical clue.

Hermione nodded.

The tense man visibly relaxed and shook his shoulders like a bear sloughing snow from its fur. 
“Good. Let’s continue with our plans, then, shall we?”

“Bring in Lord Cerwyn and Hoster, as well,” ordered Hermione, and Blackwood, who was hovering 
at the edge of the group within listening distance, nodded once, turning to holler for his son and the 
another man -- Lord Cerwyn -- to join them.
By unspoken agreement, the three men and Hermione entered her tent first, a secure location for them to discuss the upcoming attack on the Twins. Just behind her shuffled in Blackwood, holding back the flap for Cerwyn and Hoster. While Hoster had seen some of her magic in action back when she helped liberate Raventree Hall, the effect of an exterior-looking tent and a log cabin interior was a bit much for the teenager.

“Wh-what…?” he turned on his heel, taking in the odd kitchen and living area, the hallway and doors open to the two bedrooms further down.

Cerwyn’s mouth had dropped open first, but he quickly shut it with a snap, watching as the other men made straight to the rectangular dining table Hermione was using for their plans, falling into familiar seats that they preferred around the table.

Umber groaned as he sat, while Bolton leaned over to review the map that they had spread across the wood grain.

“Lord Cerwyn, why don’t you take a seat, please?” offered Hermione, and the man complied, silently with wide eyes. Once he did so, and everyone else was seated comfortably, she began. “What are our numbers at here? How many can fight?”

“If you’re looking at launching a full-scale attack on the Twins,” began Cerwyn carefully, his tones measured and cool, “then we do not have nearly enough.”

Hermione shared a glance with Umber, Bolton, Blackwood, and Karstark, which the man caught. He frowned and glanced at Blackwood’s son -- a Godssend with numbers and accountancy, as he was learning, potentially thinking of asking Blackwood for the teen to come back with him to Castle Cerwyn -- who looked as confused as he.

“I’m not looking at launching an assault,” said Hermione eventually, turning to face the man. “What I need are really a handful or so of soldiers capable of fighting.”

Karstark frowned and crossed his arms, while Umber snorted. “Two handfuls,” the large man grunted.

Hermione shot him a glare, and amended, “Fine. Two handfuls. Capable soldiers who could listen to me and follow my orders. Ideally, the stealthiest we have.”

Cerwyn glanced at Hoster who nodded thoughtfully. Bolstered, Cerwyn turned back to Hermione. “We can find them.”

“Excellent,” she said, smiling, but it was more like baring her teeth aggressively. “We’ll meet with them first thing tomorrow, so if you could pick out two dozen, I’d be grateful, Lord Cerwyn.”

The man glanced around the table, quickly taking stock of how the men around her deferred to her instruction, and nodded as well. “Of course, my Lady.”

“Shall we go over the plan?” suggested Bolton calmly.

Hermione nodded and stood, pushing her chair back as she leaned over the table. “Those chosen by Cerwyn will join us tomorrow for the next two weeks in training.”

“Training?” echoed Hoster, loudly.

When everyone turned to look at him, he blushed scarlet. “Ah, my apologies, my Lady.”
Blackwood scowled at his son, but Hermione smiled softly and nodded. “Yes -- training. I’m going to using a bubblehead charm to help everyone with this plan, so everyone has to get a feel for the spell and breathing underwater.”

At Hoster’s continued and growing incredulous look, Umber quickly intervened, especially as a glance toward Hermione had her eyes beginning to narrow. One interruption was fine, it seemed, but not two.

“Aye, lad,” rumbled Umber. “Lady Hermione’s magic allows her to create a breathable spell around our heads. We will be swimming down the Trident towards the Twins, instead of launching an attack on the castle. They won’t expect something to come from the water, and especially not something from under the water.”

Hoster’s mouth dropped open. “Under the water, Lord Umber?”

“Oh, Hoster,” said Hermione, with a shark-like grin on her face, one that was mirrored by everyone else at the table except Cerwyn. “You’re about to learn how wonderful magic can be.”

Later that evening, as Hermione exited her tent, she spotted a lone figure at a large bonfire, sitting cross-legged on a log that soldiers had felled earlier to create seating. Several other bonfires were going, in a concentric arc around the perimeter of the camp as a barrier from any wild creatures.

Seeing the man only in profile, Hermione started as she recognized the slope of his nose, the scraggly, bushy, and untrimmed beard, and the slumped shoulders. He was playing with something in his hand -- a bit of string, twine, or just even a twig -- she couldn’t tell.

Hermione paused, hovering indecisively for a moment -- do I go or speak with Umber about the training for tomorrow morning? -- but then gave herself a tiny shake of the head and strode to the log. She promptly sat, startling the man, but kept her face forward, eyes on the flickering orange flames.

“My Lady,” the man greeted, quietly.

Hermione inclined her head. “Karstark.”

They fell silent.

Eventually, Karstark sighed and tossed what was a twig into the fire with a vicious movement.

“Is something bothering you?” she asked quietly, glancing at him and turning her head partially towards him as well.

“Forgive me, my Lady,” he muttered. “My concerns are not yours. You do not need to worry about me.”

Hermione felt her heart clench. She turned to face the man fully. “Lord Karstark--” she paused and took a deep breath. “Rickard.”

He turned to her in surprise at his given name.

“Torrhen was my closest friend here,” she began softly, glancing away toward the fire and then back at him. The pain of losing him -- so recently -- made her throat close and her chest ache. “I miss him every day and I only knew him for about a year. He was your son and you knew him better and longer than I ever could.”
She glanced up at the starry sky, some of the lights disappearing behind ominous clouds, and rolled her lower lip into her mouth, biting down on it hard. “I can’t even imagine how you’re feeling. Edd is still here, but Harrion is somewhere in the Westerlands as a Lannister prisoner -- and we’ll get him back, I promise -- and I -- I mean, I just --”

Her shoulders slumped, and soon she was mimicking the pose she first saw Karstark in. “I feel like I’ve let you down, somehow. Along the way.”

When the man didn’t respond, she glanced up at him and saw that he was watching her intently. His salt-and-pepper hair was darker in the encroaching darkness, but the flickering fire etched much deeper lines on his fatigued face; Hermione was surprised, having not considered him that old or troubled that he had deep grooves of worry lines -- but the death of his youngest son clearly impacted him far more than she initially realized.

“My Lady,” he finally said, his voice low and warm, “Hermione. You are by no means a disappointment. Nor have you let me -- or any of us here -- down. Without you, I fear things would have been much worse.”

The band around Hermione’s chest eased at his words.

He sighed, deeply. “Perhaps it is hard for me. I have three--” his face collapsed briefly in pain, and he cleared his throat. “Two grown sons whom I help to raise and rear into strong Northern men. Men who always did the right thing, were fearsome and true with their swords. Men who did the right thing, and were loyal without fault.”

Karstark looked at her, a small smile on his lips, partially hidden under a moustache in need of trimming. “My daughter, Alys, is a year or so younger than you. I haven’t seen her since we marched south, so long ago now. I can only hope and pray to the Old Gods that she is well.”

He paused, that smile on his face as he turned back to the fire. “But then I see you, and you remind me of her -- and I know she will be well. That she is well. Because you are strong, and resilient, and capable, Lady Hermione.”

Hermione felt a flush spread across her cheeks. She leaned forward to try to catch Karstark’s eyes, and when she did so, she said, emphatically, “Thank you, Lord Karstark.”

He hummed in agreement. “Yes. Particularly about the women and children at the Twins.”

Hermione fell silent. She knew that Karstark didn’t necessarily approve; while he wanted revenge for what happened to Torrhen, he wanted the Frey soldier who killed him in battle -- not the slaughter of women and children who didn’t directly hold the sword.

Although Hermione felt the familiar bubble of rage build her in chest, she schooled her features and asked, coolly, “What about them?”

“Your magic is quite wondrous,” began the man hesitantly, sending her an imploring look. “Is there nothing that would substitute for killing them?”

“Why should I do that?” she asked in response, hedging any answers. I can humour his opinions,
she thought. *There’s no need to alienate anyone.*

“My Lady,” said Karstark gravely, his tone shifting quickly. “It is one thing to kill a man when you both have swords in your hands and your bloodlust is up. It is quite another to plan someone’s murder and follow through with it.”

He stood, brushing dirt off his hands and onto his trousers, looking down at Hermione. “And if there is one thing that I’ve learned about you, Lady Hermione, it is that you do what is right, and not what is easy.”

Karstark turned on his heel and walked away, leaving Hermione staring after him until the darkness swallowed his form.

A series of controlled Apparations had Hermione able to create four Portkeys to Greywater March, at the head of the Trident, a single fork in the Neck that would travel south and feed directly into a wider, wilder river at the Twins.

The water was murky, a mixture of grey and brown, with green floating algae. On either side of the bank, strange, large bushes with pointed, floppy leaves grew in patches and creeping vines scaled up large tree trunks where softly hissing reptiles -- some cross between a Komodo dragon and chameleon -- lazily reclined. The air was humid and smelt like rotted leaves; Hermione was inordinately pleased that they would be leaving the swampy lands of House Reed shortly.

Hermione stood on a shallow, sandy bank with Eddard at her side, and Karstark, Umber, Bolton, Blackwood, his son Hoster, and a few others clustered nearby. Earlier in the day, Hermione had told them no armour -- just boiled leathers --and then charmed everything black (Umber, in a jovial mood to gain some revenge on the Freys, had joked about “taking the Black,” but Hermione wasn’t quite sure she understood the reference fully -- something about a wall?).

“Remember, breathe normally,” she instructed, facing the baker’s dozen amount of men in front of her. “The bubblehead charm will not fail. I’ll also be casting a warming charm to keep us temperate in the water. *Do not lose your sword or crossbow. Do not pull it out until we are at the Twins.* Once you emerge from the water, the bubblehead charm will dissipate and you will breathe normally without it. Keep in formation, stay close, and eyes forward. Remember: our target is the left tower first and once it is secure, we’ll move to the right.”

There were nods of understanding around -- most had seen Hermione’s magic in action by now -- and they had trained specifically for the plan for several weeks.

“There will likely be a sentry on watch,” inputted Umber gruffly, eyeing everyone and holding their gazes. “I will lead first and take them out, and then you all will emerge second.”

“This is not a battle,” finished Hermione, his voice grim. “This is a stealth mission: we arrive silently, unknown. We get in, and we take out the Freys one by one, quickly and quietly. We round up any women and children into a single space -- the hall is our planned location -- and if need be, I can hit them with a *silencio* to keep us hidden. Time and precision is *key*."

She stopped and looked around. “Any questions?”

Silence greeted her, and Hermione nodded once herself, moving directly to Eddard, as one of the two (Umber being the second) to lead the men into the water. She tapped Eddard smartly on the chest and then the head with her wand; the first was the warming charm and the second, the bubblehead. Eddard held his breath for several seconds, moving straight into the cold, murky water
of the Trident until his mouth and nose were entirely submerged.

He raised a single hand and flicked two fingers in a jolly salute, and everyone breathed a heavy sigh of relief, which Hermione gamely ignored. It was one thing seeing her magic, but it was another experiencing it firsthand.

She moved down the line, and soon everyone was submerged except her; she holstered her wand and nonverbally and wandlessly cast the warming charm and bubblehead on herself, striding into the water confidently. Unlike the last time she was in murky waters, during the TriWizard Tournament, she would have full control.

She closed her eyes just as she dipped her head under the water, barely feeling the cold from the chilled swamp. Once fully submerged, she opened her eyes, darting around and spotting the indistinct and shadowy figures of the soldiers around her.

Umber was the easiest to spot as the largest, and he took control by point forward and then pushing off from the sandy waterbed, kicking up mud and a brown cloud. The others followed, Hermione somewhere in the middle.

Although it was some distance, they reached the Twins quickly, aided by magic and their desire for battle. They spotted the grime-covered stones buried deep in the foundation of the bedrock and quickly arranged themselves around Umber.

While they planned for this a month after the attack at the summit under guest rights, on the new moon, the moon itself was covered by dark, rolling clouds, providing them with extra cover. The water at the Twins was dark, almost black, and its quick flow meant that there was constant foam. Umber was able to hover just shy of breaking the surface, directing Hermione and the others in a long line around the foundation, two or three meters from the shoreline or a series of slick, algae-covered stone steps that led into the water.

Swords had been strapped to their backs and shortened crossbows to their non-dominant forearm, of which Umber, floating and pushing against the current, unstrapped. The bolt was preloaded, protected with Hermione’s magic against water damage, and carefully aimed up.

Umber hovered for a moment, and then --

The bolt pushed through the water quickly and a second later, Umber was moving out of the water and up, moving elegantly for a man his size as he disappeared.

Hermione followed immediately her wand in her right hand; the others did the same but drew their swords with soft *schinks* against their sheaths. She felt the magic of her bubblehead charm dissipate with a soft *pop*.

Umber had caught the sentry who had been posted by the steps of a broken and unused dock; the bolt had gone straight through the man’s chin and into his head, killing him instantly. The large man dragged the man back down into the water.

Hermione waded through the water until she reached the steps, her hair thick and heavy around her head as water sluiced off her in rivets the more she climbed. Their dark colours blended in with the middle of the night, and with few lamps or torches around the exterior of the first tower, Hermione was practically invisible.

Hoping that the left tower was identical to the right, Hermione turned and crouched, tracing her wand along the thick wall until she created an arch, tall enough for Umber to duck through. The
moment her wandtip touched the opposite side of the wall, the line she drew flashed orange and the stone split down the middle, folding back to create a darkened entryway to the lower levels of the castle.

Umber moved first, Bolton and Blackwood following, along with five other soldiers in their group; Hermione went in the middle with Eddard at her back and Hoster behind him, and the rest of the selected soldiers followed to close the gap.

Their steps were silent and evenly measured as they inched forward down the darkened, narrow halls, slightly crouched and ready, hugging the walls, and using the elongated shadows between hall sconces to provide cover. There was a low hum of activity in more light from the nearby kitchens, not protected by guards. Instead, the group swarmed the two entrances -- one along the hall and the other, on the opposite side with a passage leading up to the hall -- and shut the doors quietly, with Hermione barricading them by melting the iron lock and hinges into molten sludge. She finished by tossing a *silencio* at the door, and then the other, just as the occupants inside noticed and began to shout.

“Keep going,” she murmured her instructions and turned to continue down the hall.

As it was the middle of the night, few were awake or roaming, but there were still some night guards standing by key rooms: the armoury on the ground floor, as well as the widened hall that led to the inner courtyard. Those men were snuck up to from behind, and their throats slit with their steel, leaving the castle entrance defenseless.

Hermione followed the Northerners and two Riverlanders, eyes alert and narrowed in concentration; she did not contribute to the task, as her slicing hexes, red and bright in the dark, would give away their position. Instead, she nonverbally cast silencing charms on the fallen bodies and muffled their steps as they walked, leaving a trail of bloodied bodies behind them, hallway by hallway.

The group split into two; half, including Blackwood and Umber, up a circular stairwell, continuing to the bedrooms while Hermione remained with Bolton, Eddard, and Karstark and their soldiers. Bolton led the group, and with a glance at Karstark, who was staring at her, Hermione followed second.

She kept her feet light as they slipped down the hall; their steps silenced by her but muffled further by a thick carpet runner as they eased down three steps and ended up on an alcove balcony that overlooked a hall below.

Hermione sucked in a breath. In the other tower, the alcove was where the soldiers disguised as musicians were. They were the ones who began firing their crossbow bolts and arrows down on Robb.

She slowly stepped up to the balustrade and peered down. There were more lights in the hall -- there was almost a cozy glow -- and several Freys were sitting around the tables. There was no dais, as Walder Frey rarely left his tower that he controlled, but his sons and grandsons schemed and plotted from the left tower.

There were groups of men, some with pale hair, others with dark or long lank hair, in various stages of armour dress, and then several women, but much less so than the men. The women in the hall were miserable looking, with frowns on their faces and threadbare dresses that reminded Hermione in a way of the Weasleys -- repurposing and reusing but instead of saving money, it was because there were too many Freys and no one wanted to spend money on them.

There was one man that Hermione knew particularly, and her eye was drawn to him. Tall, with broad shoulders and long brown hair, his face was cold and jaw square as he stood with his arms
crossed at one table. They often clashed at war meetings in Riverrun, and Hermione was looking forward to learning the man’s secrets before she killed him.

“Black Walder,” she muttered, her voice tight.

“Soon,” replied Bolton in a hiss, his voice barely a breath on the wind.

Beside her, Eddard retrieved his crossbow and lined it up, picking his target; Bolton, on her other side, had already done so, and Karstark and the other soldiers spread out along the top and had their targets as well.

Hermione pointed her wand at Black Walder. A vicious smirk wanted to spread across her lips, but instead, she ruthlessly pushed the emotion down. Although it was poetic irony that they would attack the Freys in the same manner they had attacked Robb’s army, Hermione could not let her emotions get the best of her. Instead, she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down and in her exhale, felt better.

Then --

*Stupefy*, she thought, the flash of blue from the spell racing down from the balcony and slamming into Black Walder’s back, knocking him forward and onto the table.

There was a moment of stunned silence, as the other Freys around the table stared at the large man, but then some jumped to their feet, only to have a crossbow bolt precisely target them, often through the throat or in the head, killing those men instantly.

Their stealth no longer needed, Eddard and two other soldiers vaulted over the edge of the balustrade, Hermione behind them. While they landed heavily on their booted feet, Hermione used a wandless cushioning charm to soften her fall.

Bolton and Karstark from above raced around the narrow hall towards the servant’s stairs leading down into the hall to come at the Freys from a different angle; two soldiers remained above to reload their crossbows.

Hermione ducked under the swing of a dagger by a thin, narrow-faced Frey in a silky grey jerkin with ornate scrollwork in his leather. His thin lips scowled deeply as he recognized her, cursing “*witch*,” under his breath.

Hermione spun on her heel and, using a move Torrhen had taught her, used the momentum to sweep her leg against his, knocking him down. The man was unbalanced and toppled backward, and Hermione continued the swing, her left hand flicking out. A flash of blue erupted and the man slumped over unconscious.

Hermione blinked. *But...* she looked down at her hands; in her right was her wand, and her left, empty. *Did I just wandlessly cast *stupefy* out of my hand?*

A loud cry caught her attention and she shook her head, quickly turning to the next threat. However, this Frey was sprawled on the floor in front of Bolton who had his sword pointed at the man’s throat. The Frey had a hand pressed tightly to his tight, around a bolt sticking out of the fleshy part of his upper leg. Blood gurgled around it, some spilling over into his hand.

“Please, mercy! Mercy!” he cried. “I am Walton! I didn’t know! I swear, I didn’t know! I wasn’t even there! Lord Walder called us all back to the Twins!”

Around them, the quick battle in the Hall was ending; several men lay bloodied and dead around the
tables. At some point, Bolton and Karstark had rounded any survivors to one table, and someone else had bolted the Hall doors shut.

Hysteria began to creep up on Hermione, as the sight of blood in the familiar hall, the bolted doors the only way out, and the crossbow bolts were a painful echo and reminder of what happened just a month earlier.

Cries for mercy were new, though.

Hermione stepped forward, her eyes coolly sweeping the Frey -- Walton -- from the top of his brown hair, to his wide, panicked eyes, and down to the wound in his leg.

“Was mercy given to us when you attacked during guest rights?” she asked.

The man shuddered. “It wasn’t me, it wasn’t, oh Seven protect me…”

“Wasn’t you?” she repeated, eyebrows raised. “Well, there’s an easy way to find that out. But first - -” she raised her wand consciously this way, making a mental note to refer back to earlier, and cast _stupefy_. The man slumped over, quiet and unconscious.

She rotated slowly on her heels until she was facing the table where several bloodied and bruised Freys were slumped, some wearing mulish expressions and others, utter terror.

She smiled. “Who’s next?”

Black Walder was forcibly brought to consciousness with a splash of freezing water hitting him directly in the face and soaking through his leathers. He gasped and jerked, but didn’t get very far as he was tightly bound to a single chair in a small, dark room. He tossed his head to get some of the dripping water out of his eyes, and he peered around.

“Who’s there?” he demanded. “Show yourself!”

“Gladly,” replied a feminine voice, and from the darkness, the curly-haired witch emerged.

“Remember me, Walder?”

“Witch,” he hissed.

She smiled, but it wasn’t a nice one. There was something in her hand, a bottle of some sort, and his eyes sweep back towards her.

“Are you going to poison me, witch?”

“Not at all!” she replied. “This?” she shook the bottle and the clear liquid inside sloshed a bit. “This isn’t poison, Walder. It’s veritaserum. There’s a saying in my world that I think you’re going to learn to appreciate. It’s _the truth will set you free._” She paused. “But in your case, ‘free’ means ‘death,’ so… I suppose this could be a poison, if you want it to be called so.”

He stared at her. “I’m not drinking that.”

“You really have no choice,” she replied evenly.

Suddenly an armoured gauntlet smashed into the side of his face, swinging his head around. Walder tasted blood and he spat it out. Another hit turned his head to the opposite side, and pain explored by his eye.
He turned back to the witch and saw one of the Wolf King’s personal guards standing just behind her, with two shiny gauntlets covering his hands and forearms, already splattered with blood. He eyed the material, glancing between it and the man, and realized that his black boiled leathers meant he found the gauntlets somewhere else.

The witch followed his gaze. “Your own armoury. Nice touch, don’t you think?”

He grunted.

“Ready? It only takes three drops,” she continued, holding up the bottle.

His glare made her sigh and she turned back to the other man. “Edd, if you don’t mind…?”

The Northerner -- Eddard Karstark, he recognized him now -- stepped forward and Walder could do nothing as the tall man rained down blow after blow, each calculated to hit a spot he already hit, increasing the pain.

Yes, Walder remembered, his brother was good friends with the witch. But if he’s not there now…

Walder stuttered out a wet laugh. “Lost something, Karstark? Where’s your brother?” from behind a swollen eye and through split lips, he gave the two a bloody grin. “Did one of my kin kill him?”

The next hit went to his stomach, and Walder gasped.

“Edd.”

Scowling, the stocky Karstark stepped back, the witch stepping forward. Walder lazily lifted his head to see her crouched in front of him, shaking her head, but her eyes were hard and her jaw was clenched.

“You really don’t know when to stop or keep your mouth shut, do you?” she asked, pointing her wand at his leg.

"What--?"

"Reducto."

Walder screamed. His knee -- what was left of it -- was on fire.

With his mouth open, panting for air, he offered no resistance as someone else stepped up from behind his chair and pried his jaw open. Quickly, three drops of the liquid in the bottle the witch carried were dropped into his mouth with a stopper, and then a lazy, warm feeling overcame him as his pain receded.

The witch’s voice came from a long way off, like he was hearing her from under the water.

“Now, Walder,” she was saying, her voice pleasant if not steely, “Let’s begin, shall we? Tell me, who came up with the idea to attack us under guest rights?”

The warm haze and pleasant voice had him replying instantly. He wanted to share everything. “My grandfather and brother.”

"That wasn’t so hard, was it?"

"No.”
“Wonderful. Now, Walder,” the pleasant voice continued. However, due to the haze he couldn’t see her face, but if he had, he would’ve seen the vicious grin. “You’re going to tell me everything…”

Later, Hermione stood with Bolton, Eddard, and Karstark, staring down at a glassy-eyed Walder Frey, who had finished providing them with the list of names of those involved with the attack, as well as their reasons. Off to the side, a parchment with an enchanted quill recorded everything he said.

Hermione glanced at Bolton. “I’m sorry.”

Bolton’s jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed. “Ramsay will pay his dues.” He then glanced away. “Once, maybe I would have wanted to return to a position of a Warden of the North or a King. But now…”


Hermione nodded, almost absently. “Yes… and by now, Lord Umber and Lord Blackwood should have roused everyone in bed and brought them to the Hall.” She sighed. “We’re going to have to split up to get through this quickly if we’re going to take the other tower any time before dawn.”

"Is there enough veritaserum?" questioned Bolton.

"Yes,” replied Hermione, glancing at the bottle. “I have another two in my pouch with me, and it only takes three drops. No more.”

"Very well,” the pale man said.

Somehow, Bolton and Karstark had Hermione turned and heading towards the hall, as they were using a small storage room off it for questioning, when behind she heard a gurgle and Eddard muttering, “For Torrhen, you piece of shit.”

She faltered in her step, just once, but caught herself and threw over her shoulder, “Dump the body in the river, Edd.”

And in response; “Yes, my Lady.”

The three strode into the Hall, which was now much more crowded. There were women holding onto children was various ages, many of the girls weeping. Some were crying loudly, and others just had silent streaks down their cheeks. A few women, the older ones, wore scowls and Hermione eyed them thoughtfully; they probably knew about the attack.

The men and women were separated, held at different ends of the hall, and one by one, the soldiers with Hermione and the Lords with her took the men into various side rooms to interrogate. It took several hours, even with Hermione and Umber, Karstark, Bolton, and Blackwood working separately.

Hermione stood with her arms crossed, her wand tapping against her upper arm as she stared at the women and children, those who remained in the hall. A few stared back at her, boldly, but one timid looking woman, middle-aged and worn down, plaintively asked, “What happened to my husband?”

“Who’s your husband?” asked Hermione.

She bravely stood, despite the beautiful raven-haired woman beside her grasping onto her sleeve to
pull her back down to the bench. On the woman’s other side, a dark-haired boy, no more than eleven or twelve, looked up in alarm.

“Walton Frey,” the woman said, her voice wobbling. “I am Deana Hardyng. We were -- we were visiting my nephew in the Vale. We only just returned, a fortnight before the s-summit, my Lady.”

When Hermione said nothing, Deana took a hesitant step forward, and then another. Clasping her hands to her front, her voice began to rise in terror. “Oh, please, my Lady! My Walton could not have known! We didn’t!”

She felt Karstark shift beside her and steeled herself not to look at him. *Walton Frey knew nothing about the attack,* she thought, frowning and pursing her lips. *His wife is telling the truth, and so was he under veritaserum, as did his grown son. So what do I do? He’s a grown man with a son and daughter -- whom Black Walder knew… well, and another son. I can’t… just let them go.*

“My Lady?” prompted Karstark, his voice low. There was a strain, as if he was wondering if she would just say to hell with it, and kill all the Freys -- but… *but.*

Hermione sighed and let her arms drop from their crossed position. “Edd? Bring him in.”

With a scowl, Eddard silently did so, exiting the Hall and shortly returning with Walton Frey, stumbling and limping with his bad leg. It had been dressed and treated -- roughly -- but he was alive. His wife cried out in relief and ran to him, and the two collapsed into each other’s arms, Deana running her hand over his face and hair.

Eventually, the woman turned to Hermione and gushed, “Thank you, my Lady, thank you.”

Their daughter and young son raced forward and helped their father to sit on a nearby bench, unconsciously choosing to sit at a table away from the others.

Hermione surveyed them and then impassively looked back at the women and children.

“I am not without mercy,” she began slowly, her voice carrying in the Hall. “Those who participated and knew something of the attack -- of breaking sacred guest rights -- have paid their dues, or will do so shortly. Some of you are included in that. We know your names. We know who collaborated with Walder Frey, Black Walder, and Edwyn.”

A few women stiffened their backs and Hermione knew she found those who helped. Some of their fellow soldiers moved through the crowd and separated those women from the group, some struggling and one even protesting loudly that they couldn’t treat her that way. Others looked horrified at the idea, staring at those being singled out and shoved out of the Hall for their interrogation under veritaserum.

“Yet, those of you who did not know of the attack,” she continued, drawing everyone’s attention back to her, “Your lives…”

She trailed off and a heavy, tense air settled in the room. She knew Bolton, Umber, and Edd wanted their deaths, to eradicate the Freys from Westeros for the dishonour of breaking guest rights, among other infractions. Her eyes drew towards Karstark, who met her gaze.

*Right, or easy.* She mentally sighed.

"... Your lives will be spared,” she finished, and a few burst into loud sobs of relief. “However,” she raised her voice to be heard, “That does not mean you are free to go.”
“My Lady…?” one asked.

Hermione’s cold glare softened and she felt a heavy weight on her shoulders as she said, “I can’t let any of you go free -- able to spread word of what we have done or how we got here. I’m sorry, but you will be confined to the Twins for the foreseeable future.”

There was some tense muttering and shifting.

“Look, you’ve been here awhile now, so how about I bring up some drinks and light food?” asked Hermione, appealing to the mothers. “Any of you with husbands or brothers or sons who were not involved in the attack will join you shortly.”

That seemed to bolster the spirits of the Frey women, and soon those who remained spread out around the Hall. The few soldiers who remained disappeared and returned with innocent Freys (which Hermione thought was a rather strange idea; how innocent could they be with a family like theirs under Walder Frey?). After, a few terrified and silent servants from the kitchens that they had earlier barricaded in entered with platters of cold meats and finger foods, as well as several pitchers of wine.

“Thank you, My Lady,” said a grateful and hoarse Deana as Hermione walked up and down the aisles between the seats, as the woman caught her hand. With her other, she took a generous sip of the wine to soothe her throat.

Hermione looked at her. “You really shouldn’t thank me just yet.”

Confused, the woman stared at Hermione. At the other end of the Hall, someone’s goblet clattered to the ground and the man stumbled, and then fell.

Someone screamed, but it was cut off as they dropped to the floor.

“My… Lady?” whispered Deana, fearful eyes on her as they fluttered shut and she dropped the drink, spilling the red liquid on her dress and floor as she slumped forward on the table.

Hermione detached herself and stepped back.

“You -- You poisoned them?” asked a horrified Karstark, staring open mouthed at the Hall as those remaining quickly fell to the floor or slumped somewhere.

Hermione shot him a nasty look. “Do you really think so low of me? If I am to kill someone, I’ll look them in the eye as I do it. I’m a Gryffindor, Karstark.”

She shook her head. “Merlin! You told me to do what was right instead of easy. Easy would be killing them all. Right was not; but I also couldn’t keep them here. We don’t have enough people to watch them and keep an eye out for another uprising or retaliation.”

“My Lady!” uttered Umber as they returned to the Hall after their interrogations. “Are they dead?”

Hermione huffed and stamped her foot. “No! For the last time, I didn’t kill them!”

“They’re unconscious,” said Eddard, lifting one man’s arm and letting it drop heavily back onto the table with a thud. “How long will it last?”

“Until I give them the antidote,” sighed Hermione. Surprised, Karstark made a noise and Hermione turned to him with tired eyes. “Really? It’s Draught of Living Death, Karstark. They’re in an
enchanted sleep, seemingly dead to the world until I wake them up. They can be like that for months, years. At least until Robb is back and winter is over, and we've won and are in a better position.”

Eddard gave a long, low whistle and Bolton eyed her with approval.

Hermione shook her head, her drying curls bushier than ever. “C’mon, we still have the other tower to do. At least we know who we are looking for, and can kill them right away. We’ll herd everyone else into the hall and do this again.”

“And Frey?” asked Bolton coolly. “Lord Walder, that is? Who will have the honour of killing him?”

“Leave him to me,” ordered Hermione.

The men around her shared looks, and then Umber sighed. “Well, best be back off to the water. I don’t fancy walking across the bridge and getting peppered with arrows.”

Hermione recast warming charms, and soon they were retracing their steps down the halls and towards the lower floor and hole in the wall Hermione had created. With experience now under them, the taking of the right tower of the Twins went smoothly, from start to finish. Hermione, however, joined Umber and Bolton to the bedrooms while Karstark, Eddard, and Blackwood went to the hall.

There was something terrifying as Hermione helped kicked open the bedroom doors and either stun the men or silence the women with her magic -- on her end and theirs. Everything was quick, almost disjointed as they repeated: kick the door, enter, stun any men or kill them and then silence and bind the women and children; exit and repeat.

Eventually they reached Walder Frey’s bedroom.

Umber pulled back his boot and slammed it heavily into the door, crashing it open and sending it flying in, hard enough it bounced off the wall on the other side.

“What?” the man on the bed asked stupidly, sitting up and fumbling for something on his side table.

Bolton and Umber both dashed forward, but Hermione saw the glint of metal and thought expelliarmus, her hand extended, and the knife went flying, embedding itself in a far dresser.

“Who?” demanded Frey, his legs tangled in his sheets.


In the predawn light of the room, Hermione could see the man’s eyes widen. They darted from Umber to Bolton, both who stood on either side of the large poster bed, to Hermione at the foot.

“You--” he started, struggling to find his voice and dignity amongst the silk sheets, “You won’t get away with this--!”

“Haven’t we already?” asked Hermione idly, her grip tightening on her wand. “We’re here to be your judge, jury, and executioner, Frey.”

Bolton glanced at Hermione, and then across to Umber, who met his eyes.

“My Lady,” began Umber, barely taking his eyes off Frey to address her. “It’s time for you to step outside.”

Hermione almost dropped her wand in shock. “What?”
“His Grace would not want you to murder in cold blood like this,” continued the man.

Frey cackled. “That’s right! The Wolf Pup! What has become of the so-called King? Where is he to take revenge for what I and my own had the strength to do?”

“You shut your mouth!” snapped Hermione, her wand pointed at the man. “Silencio!”

Despite being silenced, the man continued to shake with mirth, a cruel edge to his eyes as he surveyed the three in his room.

“My Lady,” tried Bolton, turning to face her. “This is not meant for you.”

Hermione looked back and forth between the two men, both who met her eyes. She turned back to Frey, who smirked.

But I -- He -- even her thoughts were disjointed as she tried to come to terms with what the two Northerners wanted her to do: leave and not witness Frey’s death. I’m not some fragile girl!

Something must have been on her face, because Umber sighed. “Please, Lady Hermione. Not -- Not this. Not like this.”

Anger churned in her gut, but she sharply dipped her head and strode out of the room, slamming the door behind her with her magic.

Moments later, Bolton opened the door. Umber had back to them, wiping his bloody blade on the once-pristine sheets of Frey’s bed. He glanced up and said, firmly, “It’s done.”

Grinding her teeth, Hermione snapped, “Fine.”

Together, they headed down to the Hall, where Karstark, Eddard, and Blackwood had already begun weeding out those named by other Freys during interrogation, taking them to side rooms to dispose of quietly. There were fewer women in this castle, but the ones who were there seemed rather composed, if not resigned to their eventual fate, sitting quietly at various tables throughout the Hall.

One, fairly pretty and familiar, kept moving from table to table to ensure that the youngest children were soothed and quiet. Hermione watched her curiously for several minutes; there were certain women that young girl ignored, clearly marking them out to Hermione and the men with her.

I wonder if she knows what’s going on, she thought, and once the girl looked up at her, Hermione waved her over.

The brown-haired woman frowned, but cast her eyes down and walked towards Hermione. “My Lady?”

“What’s your name?” asked Hermione.

“Roslin,” the girl replied, glancing up.

Hermione nodded and then pointed to the far table nearest to Frey’s dais. “Roslin, why are you ignoring those women?”

Roslin turned to look and made a face. “My Lady, you are looking for--” she swallowed thickly and her eyes dropped again. “--for those who aided the attack on the King?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, narrowing her eyes.
“Those women knew of it and helped,” said Roslin. “If not in action or deed, through ensuring that his Grace’s eyes were on the girls and not on the men.”

Hermione scowled as she suddenly realized why Roslin seemed familiar. She was in a different colour dress, but she was one of the many girls paraded in front of Robb during the summit dinner; clearly, Frey had hoped his prettier daughters and granddaughters might have caught the King’s eyes.

“And what about you?” she asked, voice cool. If she had time to examine her sudden jealousy, she might have likened it to Ron’s first star struck meeting of Fleur.

Roslin’s face went pale. “My Lady, I did not know--”

“You might not have known what was going to happen,” interjected Hermione coolly, “But you must have known what your family was trying to do with having you and the others serve the meal.”

The Frey girl flushed, her shoulders tensing.

“Would you,” she whispered, daring to look up at Hermione as she found courage, “Would you not do anything and everything to escape this place?”

Merlin, I wish I knew Occlumency and Legilimency right now, she thought moodily, staring at the other girl who was of a similar height to her. If only to know how truthful she is. But…

Hermione glanced around the dour Hall, at the scowling faces of the older women -- one even the late Frey’s wife -- and remembered the pinched look of Edwyn Frey in the other tower, and Black Walder’s cruel remarks. She tried to imagine what it would be like growing up in such a place.

She sighed, and then eyed the girl. “You need to prove it -- take a sip of a truth potion. Would you do that?”

Roslin nodded emphatically. “Yes. Anything.”

“Fine,” grumbled Hermione, scooping out a severely diminished bottle of veritaserum. “Stick out your tongue.”

The other girl did so easily, and Hermione dropped three drops of the liquid on her tongue, waited a moment, and snippily asked, “What is your name?”

“Roslin Frey,” came the even reply.

“Did you have any knowledge, or suspect, of the breaking of guest rights during the summit between Lord Walder Frey and Robb Stark?”

“No.”

“What did you think was going to happen during the summit?”

“That perhaps his Grace would take notice of me and take me away from here.”

Hermione made a face. “Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen,” she muttered under her breath. “How do you feel about the attack and breaking of guest rights?”

“Terrible,” was the monotone reply. “It was poorly done of my father and kin. It was wrong. It will anger the Gods.”
"It bloody angered me," muttered Hermione, who then sighed. "What did you do following the attack?"

"I was confined to my bedchambers on my brother’s orders. I wanted to escape, to find Olyvar."

"Olyvar?"

"My brother. He is His Grace’s squire."

Hermione’s eyes went wide and she thought of the young man under guard back at the broken tower in the Wolfswood. They had not yet decided what to do with him.

"If you could go back in time," began Hermione, carefully, "To the moments before the attack -- what do you think you would do?"

Roslin was silent, not answering immediately, but then, slowly, she answered under the haze of the potion, “I would have tried to get word to His Grace, or perhaps the others in the Northern camp. It was wrong. I would have tried to tell the witch, or ensure Olyvar knew to set the wolf free.”

"You would’ve tried to stop it?" Hermione asked, knowing that veritaserum could be tricky with ‘what ifs’ and ‘could have beens.’

"Yes," breathed Roslin, and Hermione quickly gave her the antidote.

Once the haze was gone from Roslin’s eyes, Hermione said, shortly, “I don’t like you -- I won’t lie about that. Your brother is alive and back at our camp.”

Relief spread across the woman’s face. However, it quickly drained when she saw Hermione’s unmoved one. “But?”

“But, I can’t let you leave the Twins,” said Hermione quietly.

“You won’t kill us?” Roslin confirmed, her voice wobbling a bit.

Hermione shook her head. “No. But you’ll be under an enchanted sleep -- safe, but unable to wake until I allow it with an antidote.”

“Will we… will there be pain? Hunger?” asked Roslin after a few moments of silence.

“No.”

Roslin looked around the Hall, her gaze settling on the youngest children, some barely more than toddlers. “Will they suffer?”

“You’d be as safe as anything,” replied Hermione quietly, following the girl’s brown eyes. “I’ll ward the doors myself, so that no one could come in and kill or rape. You’d be untouched, and safe. I just -- we don’t have the people to watch over in case anyone gets the idea for revenge. It would continue the cycle.”

“I understand.” The woman then straightened her back and turned to Hermione, determination in her eyes. “What do you need from me?”

An hour later, as the light from a new day broke across the quiet forests surrounding the Twins, Hermione finished the wards that contained those peacefully sleeping under the Draught of Living Death in the Hall of the Twins. The wards included Repellant charms and Notice-Me-Nots,
effectively hiding the Twins in plain sight. Determined people would attempt to break the spells, but sealing the doors to the Hall and effectively turning it into a tomb was another safety measure. The air was breathable and refreshed through vents, and things might get dusty, but the people would be safe.

The final task was to venture to the dungeons, and free those who were imprisoned during the attack.

Hermione followed the men, Karstark and Blackwood electing to remain in the courtyard in case there were any Frey stragglers. The farther down they went, the more humid and wet the dungeons became, the grey stone along the walls constantly wet with dripping water from the river above them.

“I feel like I’m in the Slytherin common room,” muttered Hermione.

“What?” asked Eddard, staring at her.

“Nothing,” she replied, sighing, and holding her wand up higher to light the way with her *lumos.*

“Are we there yet?”

“Nearly,” replied Umber from the head of the group.

Then --

"Father? Is that you?"

They turned a corner and there were cries of relief. Umber rushed to one cell, where his son, the Smalljon, rose shakily to his feet, reaching for his father through the grating.

Around them, Hermione could see several highborn prisoners, some she recognized and knew well.

"Lady Hermione!" called one, and she turned to see Patrek Mallister grinning at her from beneath a very bushy dark brown beard. His hair was longer than she remembered it, hanging straight down to his shoulders but he had it pushed off his forehead.

"Stand back," she said, tapping smartly on the lock and releasing it with a nonverbal *alohamora.* The lock clicked and the cell door swung open on loud, rusty hinges. Behind him, Lucas blinked at her act and glanced around.

"Is my father here?" he asked hopefully, stepping forward.

Hermione pointed her wand at the ceiling. “Upstairs in the courtyard, keeping watch.”

Patrek frowned, the motion pulling at his beard. “What about the Freys?”

Hermione stared at him for a long moment, and then said, “Not a problem.”

Lucas and Patrek shared a glance, but said nothing.

“Are either of you hurt?” asked Hermione instead, looking them up and down for obvious injuries. They both shook their heads. “Good, then let’s go. We’re getting out of here.”

She led them up the stairs, with several others, including a jovial Wendyl Manderly, who spoke about the meal he would eat once they were free. It wasn’t until they were all standing in the courtyard, Hermione looking around them that she realized something very important.

Those they led out of the cells were all male.
“Where’s Lady Stark?” she called loudly, and the conversations around her dropped. “Where’s Dacey?”

A long-faced, tanned man with hollow cheeks stepped forward. “Ah, is -- are they not with you, My Lady?”

Hermione slowly shook her head, turning to stare at those who came with her. Horror reflected on their faces the same emotion she felt, and with a sinking feeling, she asked, “Then where is Catelyn Stark and Dacey Mormont?”

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Credit where credit is due: I was inspired by the opening to 2011’s Three Musketeers (which is legit its only good scene) and S3E04 of Into the Badlands, “Blind Cannibal Assassins,” which features an almost exact scene for sneaking into the castle. Amusingly, I had this written and planned since Part One with the attack on the Twins, well before the show resumed. Huh.
Sansa had no desire to unpack her trunks once she was moved to Tyrion's chambers after their marriage. Instead, she left most of her things alone, instructing Shae to not touch them - the few things she was allowed to keep from her Stark heritage were in her trunks... a few forgotten hair baubles, or the doll her father bought her before his imprisonment or a swath of Stark grey fabric she ripped from a dress.

However, things weren't too bad with Tyrion. They didn't share a bed, he didn't demand kisses or attention from her, and for the most part, they dined together at night to avoid Cersei and Joffrey's malicious eyes and the loud whispers of ridicule from the court when they were forced to attend.

It was like having a friend - no, Sansa shook her head. *It's like having an ally, and that is it.*

A month into their "marriage" - or whatever it was passing as - Sansa and Tyrion had fallen into the habit of breaking their fast in their chambers and then going their separate ways. Tyrion often to the library, or some duty with Bronn as he attempted to make sense of things as Master of the Coin and Sansa to hide in their chambers with her embroidery, or with Margaery Tyrell and the Tyrell contingent who had come to King's Landing.

This morning was different, however. A Lannister guard stood outside their chambers, eyeing Bronn with ill-concealed dislike.

"What is it?" asked Tyrion, as he had opened the door, ready to leave that morning for his tasks. He was looking back and forth between the two.

"His Grace King Joffrey the First requires your presence," announced the Lannister guard with a distinct sniff to his tone. "Along with your wife."

Tyrion stared at the guard for a little longer before dipping his head in a slow nod. "I see." He turned his head and called, back into his chambers, "Sansa? It appears that my dear nephew is requesting us."

Sansa's hands shook, but she pulled the sleeves of her dress down and fussed with them for a moment to hide her nerves.

"Of course, My Lord," she demurred, lowering her eyes and falling into step beside Tyrion, with Bronn at their heels.

The guard brought them to the Small Council. Tyrion scowled as he realized that he - as the Master
of Coins - was the last to the room, filled already with not only Joffrey and Cersei, but also Varys, Pycelle, Littlefinger, and his father. Tywin was reading over notes, his remaining eye moving quickly across the parchment, a small smile on his thin lips. On his other side, Joffrey was nearly preening and Cersei's expression was full of amused malice, peering at them from behind her wine.

Sansa eased into the room, trying to remain as small as possible, and Tyrion did not blame her in the least for doing so. Instead, he swallowed and quipped loudly, drawing attention to him, "Killed a few puppies today, nephew? Puppies would be a step up from those kittens, and you're looking rather pleased with yourself."

Even the insult couldn't wipe the smile from Joffrey's face, and Tyrion's heart started to beat against his ribs as his nephew gleefully instructed, "Go on, Grandfather! Show him!"

Tyrion turned with dread towards his father, who glanced up and silently handed Tyrion the parchment he was reading from. Tyrion looked at the small paper, frowning as he read it aloud. "'We have reached the summit of our plans. Although some left early, the Freys are prepared for winter with a wolf pelt due to generous gold donations,' signed Walder Frey." Tyrion looked up. "Is this supposed to mean something?"

The glee in Joffrey's voice when he replied had Tyrion glance at Sansa in concern. "Robb Stark has been defeated! And his bitch mother!"

Sansa paled.

Tyrion carefully folded the small parchment and placed it on the table in front of him. "Defeated? How so?"

But Joffrey had continued: "Write back to Lord Frey. Thank him for his service and command him to send Robb Stark's head to me. I'm going to serve it to Sansa at my wedding feast!"

Tyrion moved quickly to Sansa's side as she swayed, but as soon as his hand touched hers, she stood straight and stared ahead, her blue eyes focused on the far wall.

"Your Grace," interjected Varys, shocked, "Lady Sansa is your aunt by marriage."

Cersei's smile was a slippery thing as she tried to soothe the faux pas. "A joke. Joff did not mean it."

Joffrey scowled at his mother, the two golden-haired Lannisters with matching green eyes glaring at one another. "Yes, I did. I'm going to have it served to Sansa at my wedding feast."

Tyrion found himself quickly losing what little patience he had for his family. "No."

Joffrey, Cersei, and even Tywin turned to look at Tyrion.

"No?" echoed Cersei, flabbergasted. "Did you just tell your King, 'no'?"

Tyrion stared at his family, and then turned back to the rest of the Small Council, dismissing his sister. "Again: how was the Stark army defeated? Defeated, by the way nephew, is not the same as dead."

Joffrey scowled and purpled in rage, but Varys was quick to interject and hopefully diffuse the situation. "Ah, yes, excellent point, Lord Tyrion. My little birds tell me that Lord Frey was not quite as successful as he claims."

Joffrey's ire swung to the spymaster. "Oh?" he ground out petulantly. "But the letter-"
"-can lie, Your Grace," finished Varys smoothly. "From what I've been told, Robb Stark, along with a significant portion of his army managed to escape."

Silence fell in the room, and Tyrion glanced quickly at Sansa to see her wipe the tiny upturn of her lips from her face.

"What did you say?" Joffrey's voice had gone low, trembling with his rage. He turned to his grandfather. "What overinflated sense of ego did Frey think he was presenting, sending that note to us when it barely tells the truth? How did he muck up your plan so thoroughly that he could not even bring me Robb Stark's head?"

Tywin's own matching glower set Tyrion's senses on alert. "I shall find out shortly." He turned to Varys. "What do you know for certain?"

Varys pursed his lips and then folded his hands into the voluminous sleeves of his yellow robes. "Robb Stark escaped through the use of..." his mouth turned down, "magic, aided by the witch in his camp. Several others, of high rank, escaped with them as well as those who survived the attack inside and outside the Twins. However, there were also highborn captives, many of Stark's personal guard. And, of course, Lady Stark herself."

Joffrey leaned back, somewhat mollified. "Ah, yes. The wolf pelt." His eyes cut to Sansa. "Her head will do just as well."

Littlefinger bowed his head, bringing his hands up to steeple in front of his face as he eyed the King and Cersei, but said nothing.

Tyrion had enough. "Sansa is no longer yours to torment." He paused. "Your Grace."

Sansa turned to Tyrion in surprise, but the shorter man was staring at his nephew, something burning in his eyes that Joffrey could not see or recognize. "Everyone is mine to torment. You'd do well to remember that, you little monster."

Tyrion rolled his eyes. "Oh, I'm the monster? Perhaps you should speak to me more softly, then. Monsters are dangerous."

Cersei shot to her feet, her goblet of wine sloshing over. "Are you threatening the King?"

The weaselly man finally spoke, his voice honeyed. "Perhaps Lord Tyrion could apologize? He is clearly worried about the wellbeing of his gentle wife, who did just learn that her mother - and might I add, a dear friend of mine growing up at Riverrun - died?"

"Life I would accept such an apology from a bitter dwarf," scoffed Joffrey, tossing his head back. "I am the King! I decide who lives and dies! And no one - not even you, uncle - can speak to me the way you do."

Sansa watched as Tywin mentally sighed - there was a slight tilt to his head and a brief flutter of his remaining eyelid - and then the tall, imposing man (very much so now with his eye patch) stood to his full height and snapped, "Any man who must say, 'I am the king' is no true king."

"I am the King by right of birth!" retorted Joffrey.

Varys, Pycelle, and Littlefinger all found reasons to look away as the conversation descended into family squabbling.

"A crown is inherited," said Tywin firmly, "But a kingdom is earned. And I have seen little of you
earning anything, boy."

Joffrey's impossible rage turned to his grandfather, and Sansa felt herself relax a minute amount; enough that Tyrion felt her hand unclench from under his.

"My father won the real war! He killed Prince Rhaegar. He took the crown, while you hid under Casterly Rock!"

She hid a wince from behind her placid expression. *That won't go over well*, she thought with a sigh.

Tywin turned to his daughter, who met his gaze with slightly fearful eyes. "The king is tired. See him to his chambers."

"What?"

Cersei nodded and turned to her son. "Come along."

At the door, Joffrey's two kingsguard - Trant and Moore - stood straight while Joffrey stared incredulously at those in the room. "I'm not tired."

Cersei tried again, cajoling Joffrey to stand. "We have so much to celebrate, my love. A wedding to plan, as well! You must rest."

"No! I am the King! You can't put me to bed like I am Tommen!"

Tywin reached up to run a finger along the underside of his eye patch. "Grand Maester, perhaps some essence of nightshade to help him sleep?"

Pycelle nodded and stiffly got to his feet, shuffling out the Small Council while Cersei looped her arm through Joffrey's and held him in place as she began moving him towards the door as well.

"But I'm not tired!" the king nearly wailed.

Tyrion remained staring at his father, who busied himself looking over several letters on the table in front of him, while Littlefinger kept his eyes on Sansa, who did her best to ignore him. Varys sat serenely, his eyes looking out a far window in the Small Council room. Only once Joffrey's voice trailed away did Tyrion turn to look at Sansa.

"My Lady," he said, courteously, causing her to look at him. "Perhaps Bronn can escort you back to our chambers?" He then glanced at his father. "If that was all, of course."

Tywin nodded.

Sansa dipped into a curtsey and Bronn, who had been hovering (although he certainly didn't look like he was) by the door nodded once at Tyrion and then fell into step on Sansa's right, leading her from the Small Council.

As she left, the door remained open for a few moments and she could hear the conversation start up again, but only in snatches:

"-sonous statement! Joffrey is-"

"-crown … power?"

"*No* - armies - Robb Stark -"
"Do you disapprove?"

" - *this is war. To slaughter … peace…*

"My Lady?"

Sansa mentally cursed herself for focusing so hard on the conversation between Tyrion and Tywin that she lost herself, following Bronn down the hall as her feet automatically took her to safety in her bedchambers.

"My apologies, Ser Bronn," she murmured.

He sighed. "It's fine."

They walked to her chambers in silence, and once they were at the door, Bronn opened it and swept inside to check for any dangers - as Tyrion had previously instructed him to do. Finding none, he stepped aside for Sansa to enter. She did so, and then… stopped.

*My mother is dead,* she thought, and now that she was safe in her room, with only Bronn to see her, she allowed some of the shaking to emerge from the numbness of the knowledge that her brother and mother were attacked under guest rights.

"There is no hope left," she muttered.

"What?"

Twirling, she plastered a fake smile on her lips and laced her fingers together in front of her dress.
"Ser Bronn! Nothing at all. I was just remembering something that I need to ask Shae about later. I will be fine now, Ser. You have seen me safely back to my bedchambers, as my Lord husband asked."

Bonn eyed her suspiciously, but then he shrugged, and left, firmly shutting the door behind him.

As he did so, Sansa felt her legs shake and she barely made it the next few steps over to collapse on a chair near the fireplace.

"Mother…" she let her face fall into her hands as her shoulders shook. "Robb…"

Sansa sat in the chair by the fireplace for some time, crying and letting her own fears and worries about remaining in King's Landing - the terror and fear she constantly felt even when Cersei and Joffrey's eyes were no longer on her - mingle with her despair that Robb was not riding south for her, that her mother was dead.

*What happened to Arya? Why am I the only one left?* Her eyes, red and puffy, glanced up at the ceiling. *Are the Gods punishing me for being a silly and stupid little girl?*

Eventually, the sun that lit the chambers began to sink, and shadows lengthened and spread from the open window across the room, leaving one of the few sunspots by the foot of the bed, where her childhood tokens remained, unpacked.

"I am never going to leave this place alive," she whispered fearfully, staring at it. "We should never have gone south. Starks going south means death."

She rose shakily to her feet and then fell to the floor in front of the trunk, her shaking hands reaching out at the clasps, but hesitating before she flipped them up.
But you're no longer a Stark. You're a Lannister now, a small voice piped up in her head, and with that, she flipped the locks and shoved the trunk's lid up, staring down at the shallow shelf that held the tiny doll her father gave her, its dress stained and smelling musty. She gently shifted it aside and found the ripped wool of a grey Stark dress.

Something caught the last of the sunlight and Sansa squinted as the beam reflected and hit her full in the face. She moved her head to the side, her long red hair spilling out over her shoulder from the intricate braids Shae had done earlier, and leaned forward, shifting a bit of the fabric away.

That strange mirror from before the Battle of Blackwater twinkled back at her, the strange message on folded parchment tucked into the corner of the frame.Sansa pulled the paper free and reread the message she knew by heart, for its strangeness burned itself in her memory.

"Speak the name of your family and it shall be heard," she muttered aloud. Her lips then twisted into a small, bitter smile. "What family? My parents are dead. Robb is... who knows. Bran and Rickon are dead."

She sighed and scooped the mirror up, holding it with one hand and the note with the other as she stood and began to walk back towards the fireplace.

"Why did I even keep this?" she asked aloud, shaking her head. "At first you were a sign that someone was coming for me, and I held out on hope. But no one is coming from me now. I am a wolf without my pack - and the lone wolf dies."

She tossed the note into the fire, watching as it curled along the edges, turning black and quickly disappeared, turning into ash. She looked back down at the mirror.

"I wish I could be brave," she muttered. "Maybe then I wouldn't be so scared of everyone." After a moment, she let out a tiny laugh under her breath. "If you were in my place, I doubt you'd be scared, Arya."

She put the mirror down on the side table beside the chair, and moved away, ready to summon Shae to change into her nightdress. Her trusted friend appeared with some finger-food for Sansa's bird-like appetite, and after she had removed the braids from her hair, and helped Sansa out of the complicated dresses the women in King's Landing favoured, Sansa found herself alone once more and staring at her reflection in the glass.

The girl who looked back was tall and willowy, pale - paler than she had ever been in the North - with long, gleaming red hair. However, her long face was solemn and her cheeks were becoming hollow, not from a lack of sleep or appetite, but from her shedding her baby fat as her curves slowly widened and her waist tapered in.

More eyes would be on her the longer she remained in King's Landing and grew into a woman's body, and soon, Tyrion would not be able to protect her. She had no one she could count on, but herself.

"Be brave," she whispered to the sad-eyed young woman in the glass, "Be brave like Arya Stark. You can survive here. Keep your head down, your mouth shut, and never, ever forget what they did."

She met the blue eyes of her reflection and whispered fiercely, "The North Remembers."

"Damn right it does!" piped Arya's voice.

Sansa whirled and her eyes darted around the empty bedchambers, looking into the shadows at the
corners. She eased forward, away from the glass and then sunk to her knees, looking under the bed; it was empty except dust balls.

"Arya?" whispered Sansa, a desperate feeling like hope bubbling up in her.

"No, it's Nymeria," her sister's voice sighed, and Sansa could picture her rolling her grey eyes and scoff as she said next, "Of course it's me, stupid!"

Arya! thought Sansa, excitement growing. "Where are you?"

"The mirror."

Sansa paused and then crept forward to the forgotten mirror at the side table. "What?"

She then peered down, and nearly leapt back in surprise at not seeing the reflection she was just shortly looking at, but rather her sister's long face, pale grey eyes, and a head full of thick, untamed dark brown hair.

Sansa picked up the mirror and stared. "Is this - am I dead?"

Arya-in-the-mirror huffed again and rolled her eyes. "Gods above, Sansa! You're not dead. Yet, anyway - keep pissing me off and I might kill you myself."

"Arya!" shocked coloured Sansa's tone, but it was like being back in Winterfell, complaining to her mother about Arya's latest stunt and knowing that she was not behaving ladylike at all.

"Good to see you're still you," her youngest sister grinned, showing off all her teeth.

"Where are you?" asked Sansa, sitting down in the chair.

Arya frowned, and then there was something strange going on with her reflection - it rotated and then Sansa was looking at a lot of blue: a blue bed, blue curtains, pillows in cream and beige, and a setting sun framed by large mountains.

Then Arya's face was back in the mirror's frame. "I'm at Riverrun. I've been here for a few months now."

Sansa let a loud exhale escape her. "You escaped!"

Arya's frown smoothed. "After father's…"

Sansa nodded.

Arya turned her face away, but her jaw was tense. "I was there when it happened. I heard you scream."

Horror suffused Sansa. She still had nightmares of her father's death, could still hear the phantom swing of Payne swinging Ice and the sound of it hitting the chopping block; of the coppery scent of thick, warm blood as her father's head was severed, and the cheers of the crowd watching.

To know that Arya had been there too… but then she remembered when her father was brought out, shouting something at someone in the crowd suddenly, his eyes constantly darting and then locking on something by the statue after he gave her one last, warm look…

The two sisters sat in silence, separated by miles and a thin plate of glass.
"How is… how does this work?" Sansa finally asked, breaking the silence.

"Magic," shrugged Arya. "Hermione didn't have time to explain it - she an' Robb had a lot to do after grandfather's funeral - but she had this made for me. And one for Bran and Rickon, too. Yours was delivered 'specially."

"B-Bran and R-Rickon?" stuttered Sansa.

Arya nodded and smiled. "Yeah, Rickon's out somewhere by Skagos, at last check. An' Hermione said Bran was making his way north of the Wall. So he's probably with Jon."

When Sansa didn't reply, Arya stared. "Didn't you know?"

"Know?" repeated Sansa. "How? I'm a prisoner here, Arya! I only learned today that mother is dead! And that Robb is missing!"

Arya's mouth dropped open. "Robb's not missing! Well… not really. Kind of. Anyway, he's alive and fine. Just misplaced by the army. And Mother's…" Arya turned away. "Lord Bracken came to Riverrun about two weeks ago now; he said that Robb's somewhere safe, but we can't see him. And that Mother was left behind at the Twins. I don't think she's dead." A troubled look overcame Arya's face. "I'd know. I'd feel it if she were dead."

"Arya…" Sansa let her voice trail off. "This… this witch-"

"Hermione," interrupted Arya, a flash of something in her eyes.

"-Ah, yes, Hermione," continued Sansa, tripping over the strange name, "Can you trust her? Are you sure she hasn't put a spell on you? She's probably dangerous - Lord Varys was telling me about magic from Asshai-"

Disgust came over Arya's face and Sansa stopped speaking, watching her sister warily as the familiar look of disappointment settled on the face that looked so much like their father.

"Hermione's not from Asshai!" snapped Arya. "She saved me when I was in Harrenhal! She saved Gendry and made sure that he'd stay with me! And Robb trusts her! She saved his life - or, that's what Uncle Edmure told me - and she's helped the army at the Battle of the Stone Mill, and she went with everyone to the Twins for the summit."

Arya shook her head. "Gods, you really are a Lannister, aren't you? I don't know why I'm even talking to you-"

"No!" Sansa clutched at the mirror and brought it closer to her face. "No! Don't go! Please! Arya, please! I don't know anything! They don't tell me anything - they summon me and tell me that Bran and Rickon are d-dead! Or that Mother is dead! Joffrey used to have me stripped in front of the court and beaten by his Kingsguard! Please!"

A sob tore from her throat and she squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't lose Arya - not when she just learned that her siblings were all still alive.

"You married the Imp," said Arya finally, her voice carefully even.

"I had no choice," whispered Sansa, hiccupping half-way through.

"The mirror is meant for communication. Once you used it, Hermione was going to come and get you, to bring you back to Riverrun," admitted Arya slowly, watching her sister.
Sansa’s breath hitched. The look Arya was giving her was far more than she expected her thirteen-year-old sister to level her with; there was something cautious in it. "Come get me?"

Arya slowly nodded. "Hermione just needs to see a place, and then she can Apparate there."

Although she didn’t know what Apparate meant, Sansa caught the meaning - she could return to her family!

Her fingers around the mirror turned white as she clenched it tighter. "How?" she demanded. "How? What do I need to do?"

Arya frowned, turning away from the mirror. Clearly, someone else was in the room. There was a momentary jostle to her sister’s frame, and then a strange face was looking out at her: there was a familiar enough feature of an oblong face, and auburn hair, but the face was masculine and slightly tired.

"Niece?"

"Uncle?" replied Sansa, with a hint of confusion.

"That's Edmure!" she heard Arya call helpfully from some distance.

Edmure, the new Lord Paramount, nodded. "Sansa - I'll get a hold of Lady Hermione shortly and she can come to get you tonight. She's just finishing up some plans to attack the Twins."

Sansa gasped.

"-But she'll come get you as soon as she knows," finished Edmure patiently. "I know she will."

"Why - why is she going after Lord Frey?" asked Sansa quietly.

Edmure's face hardened. "For breaking guest rights. For attacking the Northern and Riverlands host that travelled with the King. Revenge, I suppose."

Good for her, the thought popped into Sansa's head before she had time to censor it or realize what she thought. Varys might have had a bad experience with magic, and attempted to taint or worry her about the witch in her brother's camp - but everything she had heard so far was that of a woman helping and using her magic for good.

Perhaps I can be of some help, that same voice offered again, and Sansa found herself speaking the thought, watching her uncle frown.

"How so?"

Sansa took a deep breath. "Well... Joffrey is getting married to Margaery Tyrell soon. And I often am brought to the Council, where they often parade their successes or plans in front of me. To demoralize me, I suppose."

Edmure's frown shifted into shock. "Sansa?! Are you - are you offering to spy?" He shook his head. "No - you are my niece, my kin. Cat would have my head. Robb would have my head! You are a Princess of the North!"

Sansa dug her figurative heels in. "Not for too long. But you have me here, and you should use me. No one suspects me - the daughter of a traitor and the wife of Tyrion Lannister. I can be... useful."

Please, she thought, desperately. Let me redeem myself for what I did. For how I used to be. Let me
do something for my family, for Robb. For the North.

When Edmure opened his mouth again, Sansa cut him off.

"Let me be clear, uncle," she said firmly, sitting straight in her chair, fire returning to her and her blue eyes staring at him. "I'm not asking - I'm telling. A few more weeks, two moons at the most until the wedding. I can be useful here, and if there is anything I can do to help my family, I will do it."

Peace settled on Sansa, and for the first time, in a very, very long time, she felt… safe.

It was odd looking out at midsummer beyond the open window of Hogwarts' infirmary when he last knew the biting chill of autumn. Old Nan used to call him and his siblings "summer children," those who knew only the positives of harvests and sunlight; the brief winter he had experienced as a young boy was no sample of the one that was shaping up in Westeros when he disappeared.

How will my men handle it? Do they have enough food? Shelter? What became of them after the Twins? He wondered, hands clasped behind his back as he stared unseeingly out across the Hogwarts grounds. Each thought more distressing than the last, and he was so lost in his thoughts that he failed to hear the footsteps echo across the stone floor, coming to a stop just a few feet behind him.

"Stark?"

Startled, Robb turned on his heel, hand reaching for his sword at his side, but he hands grasped air and he overbalanced, barely catching himself in the spin to face a vaguely bemused Harry Potter.

Kindly, the black-haired man ignored the response and asked, "How are you feeling? Has Madam Pomfrey given you the okay to leave?"

Robb frowned at the strange word - okay - but he had heard it enough in Lady Hermione's company to know what it meant and what Potter meant by the question. He nodded once, taking a step forward, the strangeness of the - what had the female Maester called it? Oh, yes - rubber of the sole giving Robb a bit more bounce to his steps than normal.

His old clothes - his tunic, trousers, jerkin, as well as his small clothes - had all been removed from his body upon entering the Hogwarts infirmary and yet to be returned. Although, he had had been reassured that the "elves would mend everything just fine, including getting that ghastly blood stain out" (He didn't know what was meant by elves, so he merely nodded.). Instead, he was dressed in odd fashion, very similar to what Lady Hermione and now Potter wore: loose-fit trousers in a strange, rough blue fabric, and a shorter tunic that he was used to, with buttons running up the front to close the fabric.

Potter wore a knitted shirt overtop his tunic, with the sleeves pushed up to reveal his wand holster strapped to his right forearm; it also revealed a series of silver and light brown scars of various shapes and lengths that ran up and down his arms. Robb eyed those and wondered if he received them the same time Lady Hermione gained her Mudblood scar.

Potter gestured to his bed. "Not going to wear the robe?"

Robb eyed the large, flowing fabric with distaste. It reminded him too much of an ill-fitting cloak. "No, thank you."

Potter grinned. "Don't blame you. It took me years to feel comfortable in wizard's robes. C'mon then, we're going to the Headmistress's office. Professor McGonagall wants to talk to you, but we'll take
the long way 'round. Give you some time to sightsee Hogwarts."

"Ah," began Robb, blinking, "Well, thank you."

"Yeah, no problem," replied Harry, turning on his heel, presenting his back. Robb tried not to bristle. "This way, then."

Unfamiliar with *following* someone, Robb matched his pace with Potter until they drew side-by-side. The other man - Hermione's friend - didn't seem to notice or care, leading Robb out the infirmary and down various carpeted hallways. Each was equally as large and wide as the last, with tall vaulted ceilings and dark wooden beams crisscrossing above them. Portraits and landscapes paintings lined the walls overtop of tapestries, each as different as the one that came before it, providing a colourful and warm backdrop to those within the silver, pewter, and gold frames.

In Winterfell, as well as Riverrun, there were few precious portraits. Most Lords preferred tapestries or statues as finding a master painter was hard enough and many preferred the Free Cities over Westeros. To see so many in one place was staggering and Robb soon found himself far behind Potter, lingering over one landscape or another, each reminding him of the portrait he showed Hermione of the tower in the Wolfswood - the only one he had.

"I say!" remarked one jovial male portrait in a pointed purple cap, causing Robb to stumble backward in surprise with a yelp. "It's Harry Potter!"

Across, a beautiful woman with golden skin and black hair held back by a circlet called out in an accented voice, "What brings you to Hogwarts, Harry Potter?"

Even as other portraits began to move, the people within the frames speaking up and over one another, Robb stared in fascination and horror as Potter strolled over to the portrait of the exotic woman and greeted her like a friend, jerking a thumb back over his shoulder at Robb, who shuffled towards his guide. "Hey, Circe. I'm just showing Robb Stark Hogwarts - he's not from around here."

The woman in the portrait eyed him up and down, and there was something - a knowing glint - in her eyes when she spoke next. "No. He is from quite far away, is he not?"

Robb swallowed thickly and mumbled, "My Lady."

"Anyway, we're going to go through, okay?" said Potter just as cheerfully. "Piggywiggly."

Robb shot Potter a sharp glance at the strange words - *is he casting magic?* - but Circe just nodded, her portrait swinging open on invisible hinges to reveal a dark passage beyond and stone stairs leading up.

"A secret passageway?" gapped Robb. "Hidden behind a portrait?"

"Oh, there are loads," replied Potter with a grin. "Coming?" He then shouted, "See you later, Circe!"

"Until the next, Harry Potter!" the woman in the portrait shouted back. "And you, Robb Stark. I look forward to our next meeting!"

Robb shivered and followed Potter as the man stepped into the portrait. He conjured a glowing ball of light with his wand and then threw it up in the air, where it hovered and then floated serenely ahead of them, lighting the way.

They exited on a completely different floor, in a different part of the castle, where large windows overlooked the lake. Robb turned, unable to orient himself.
Potter saw him, and shrugged. "Magical castle. One day, the Headmistress's office is on the second
door. Today, it's the fourth. When Professor Dumbledore was alive, it was usually the seventh."

"How - What -" Robb struggled to find his words. "Magic does that?"

"Hogwarts does," clarified Potter. "There's no law or reason with magic. You just can't explain it
away or figure it out. You just go with the flow."

I don't think I will "go with the flow," Potter, thought Robb darkly, distastefully eyeing the back of
the man as they walked towards the ugliest stone gargoyle he had ever seen - including those
rumoured at Dragonstone - only for Potter to stop and speak to it.

"Muezza."

"Does everyone speak to portraits and statues in this realm?" Robb asked sarcastically.

The gargoyle and Potter both turned to look at him, and then the gargoyle leapt out of the way,
revealing circular stone stairs. Potter stepped on the lowest, and then Robb bit back another cry of
shock as the stairs began to rotate up, taking Potter higher and higher.

"C'mon on, Stark!" the man called, something humorous in his voice.

His mouth twisted down into a scowl, but Robb tentatively stepped on to the lower step, and then
immediately struggled to reach out at the walls, even if he was moving up, to retain his balance. It
took a moment or so, but then he spread his legs and planted his feet, and crossed his arms.

At the top, the large wooden door was already open and Potter stood just inside it, waiting for him as
the stair Robb was on levelled to the floor and stopped its rotations.

Glancing around the large office, with several arches to a single, supporting dome in the middle,
Robb allowed awe to overtake his features. There were soft couches, covered with square-print
blankets, floor to ceiling shelves filled with books, and along the walls, many, many portraits; some
were awake and staring at him, and others dozing or snoring.

Underneath the giant dome was a large desk, filled with various scrolls and parchments, and single
quill with a fluffy feather at the end twitching as it wrote, an invisible hand guiding its words on the
parchment. Behind the desk, an elderly woman rose. She wore resplendent green velvet robes styled
into a dress, with a wide black belt and matching black hat tilted just so on her greying hair. She had
gold spectacles - the things on her face that Potter also had, which he said was for seeing - that
framed her face and the many wrinkles and lines that pronounced just how many things she had seen
in her life.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," she greeted with an almost-Northern accent that had Robb immediately
relax in her presence. "I am glad to see you out of the infirmary, Mr. Stark. I am Minerva
McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

In front of her desk were two chairs and Potter artlessly flopped into the one on the left, leaving the
right for Robb. As he did so, McGonagall used her wand to direct a large tin towards the young man,
whose face lit up. He reached in and withdrew a biscuit that he eagerly began snacking on.

He sat stiffly, his back straight. "My thanks for you and your Maester, Headmistress McGonagall.
From what she said, the wound was severe."

"Madam Pompfrey is one of the best Healers in Britain," agreed McGonagall. "But a wound like
yours is easy enough to heal if caught early enough. We've had… experience dealing with Muggle
weapons, particularly medieval weapons like swords - although we have not had to deal with those wounds for some time."

"Do people not use swords here? Lady Hermione never really expanded on that," asked Robb curiously.

McGonagall and Potter shared a look that Robb did not like.

"What?"

McGonagall cleared her throat. "Mr. Stark -"

Robb couldn't stop the words as they exited his mouth. "Lord Stark, if we want to be informal, Headmistress. Or, if you wish to use my proper title, it's King - King Robb, the first of my name; King in the North."

Potter was eyeing him from behind spectacles with wide, green eyes, a biscuit halfway to his mouth. McGonagall was frowning but nodded slowly.

"My apologies," she said slowly, carefully as she looked him over. Robb did his best not to bristle. "Lord Stark - what do you know of Hogwarts?"

Thrown by the change in subject, Robb looked back and forth between the two. "Only what Lady Hermione told me: that there was a battle recently, that she was something called a 'Muggleborn' and discriminated against here. That she didn't know of magic before eleven, and a few spells that I've seen her use in front of me and my men."

"What about Miss Granger's parents?" asked McGonagall, something in her tone strange. "Or about her time growing up before attending Hogwarts?"

Robb shook his head. "Uh, nothing."

Potter groaned, lowering the biscuit completely.

"Oh," answered McGonagall, frowning. "Oh, dear."

"What? What is it?" asked Robb, confusion making his voice rise.

"Our world… well," stumbled Potter, glancing not only at the Headmistress for help, but also the sleeping portrait of an old man with a long white beard and half-moon spectacles, "It's just that… well…"

"What Mr. Potter is trying to say, poorly," finished McGonagall waspishly with a glare at the now sheepish young man, "Is that Muggles no longer fight with swords or weapons like yours, Lord Stark. They haven't for at least a century. Most Muggles fought with spears or bows."

"And now," added Potter, recovering from the look, "They fight with guns and tanks and missiles."

"I-" Robb looked back and forth between the grim visages of Potter and McGonagall.

What would I do without my sword? He wondered; it was as much as part of him as Grey Wind - he had been raised on the weapon and was expected to fight with one, as well.

A more frightening thought came to Robb then: Who am I without my sword - with my title as Lord or King in the North; when I am here, they call me 'Mister Stark' but… this world…
Robb took a deep breath. "Headmistress McGonagall, Auror Potter," he began formally, as he had been trained to do. He let his hands fall open, palms up as he entreated at them, "I find myself very lost in an unfamiliar land and in need of assistance. Will you help me?"

McGonagall's eyes softened, and while Potter still looked dubious (no doubt wanting to know more about Lady Hermione), a glance at the Head of Hogwarts had him nod once, and sigh.

"Well," he began, a small smiling appearing on his face, "You're going to need somewhere to stay, and I happen to have a home with far too many spare and empty bedrooms."

"As well as a rather well-stocked library," added McGonagall, a knowing glint in her eyes, "As I seem to recall Ms. Granger overhauled it after the War." She turned to Robb. "And Hogwarts library will be at your disposal, to aid you in figuring out a way home."

Overwhelmed, Robb bowed his head. "My thanks, Headmistress, Potter."

"Are you a good student?" asked Potter, studying Robb with narrowed eyes. "Because unless he absorbs books the way Hermione does, he can't do this by himself!"

"An astute point, Mr. Potter." McGonagall was soon eyeing him as well, making Robb squirm a bit under the double gaze. "I believe, regarding the situation of Ms. Granger being in another universe and having Lord Stark here, we should call in the reinforcements."

"Reinforcements?" echoed Robb.

McGonagall drew her wand and a silvery wisp emerged from its tip, coalescing into a small tabby cat that sat on its haunches and stared at the headmistress. "To Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Weasleys, Andromeda Tonks, Arabella Figg, and Aberforth Dumbledore: A development in Ms. Granger's case has emerged, and I ask that all who can to attend a meeting of the Order at the Old Headquarters, at 8 o'clock, prompt."

The cat nodded once, and soared out the window, right through the glass. In the meantime, Potter was digging through his various pockets, sliding a bit down in his chair as his hand went into the tight pocket of his jeans. He fished out a golden coin.

McGonagall's smile widened and there was something of approval in her eyes. "You kept it?"

"I know Luna and Neville still have theirs," said Potter, answering something without really answering the question. "And now we can see how many others will come." He too pulled out his wand and tapped the surface of the coin, right in the middle of a strange creature's face. At the bottom, letters swirled and rearranged themselves and Robb read: Info on HG. Need help. My house, 8 pm.

"What - what was that?" asked Robb, finally finding his voice.

"A Patronus," answered McGonagall, her tone similar to Maester Luwin when he was imparting new knowledge. "A physical manifestation of a happy memory to ward off Dark creatures, and as you can see, send messages. We often used them during the War to send secure information as other forms of communication could fall into enemy hands."

"And the coin was something Hermione cooked up back in fifth year," added Potter with a grin. "To send messages and let members of the DA know when a meeting was taking place."

Robb nodded slowly. "Yes - a… a Protean charm? I think that is what she called it. We used it on our parchments to send instantaneous messages amongst my men."
An approving look was on McGonagall's face, just as Potter laughed. "That sounds like Hermione, alright." A curious look appeared on the young man's face. "Just what has she been getting up to?"

Robb took the time to think back of the various instances of magic he had seen Lady Hermione exhibit, as well as her skill in Apparation, right to his bedside when he was delirious with fever at the Crag; or her angry face and her turned back in front of his men in his war council; or the soft smile and laugh she gave him in the middle of their dance, right before everything went sour…

The answering grin Robb gave Potter was nothing short of devious. "Oh, you have no idea…"

"I look forward to hearing about it though," he replied, a more genuine smile on his face. "Clearly, Hermione trusts you. And I'd like to think she's a good judge of character - most of the time, anyway. So…"

He held out his hand and Robb stared at it. Potter chuckled. "We shake hands when we meet someone - no weapon in our dominant hand."

A small genuine smile appeared on Robb's face, and he glanced from the hand to Potter's eyes. "We clasp forearms upon greeting with allies."

"And with friends?" he didn't seem to mind his hand hanging between them.

Robb didn't reply, instead reaching out with his own right hand and shaking Potter's. "Well met, Potter."

"Nice to meet you," he replied, withdrawing his hand, "And - by the way? For friends? It's Harry."

"Harry," repeated Robb. And like that, he had an ally in the strange world he found himself in, and hopefully, a friend to get him home; back to his army, back to his war, and importantly, back to Hermione.

Hermione felt the unfamiliar sensation of things spiralling out of her control. Her stomach took a sharp swoop downward, toward the dirt beneath her boots, and she turned to stare in silent horror back at the closed and sealed doors to the Twins, where she just left Roslin Frey and several of her kin in an enchanted sleep.

Sure, she could wake them up again, with a "so sorry, it hasn't been four years or anything, but just out of curiosity, do you know what happened to Catelyn Stark?" but that option was ludicrous and on top of it, it would be a waste of her potions.

The other option - of asking those Freys who had been an actual part of and helped planned the attack during the summit - was long past, as those men with her had killed all of them, on her orders.

She stifled the moan of despair that rose in her throat by clamping her mouth shut tight, her lips thinning.

_How did it get to this?_ She thought, mentally chastising herself. _Stupid, stupid, Hermione! You may be a Gryffindor, but you've never been as stupid as Harry to rush into danger or a plan without thinking things out first! When did this change?_

Actually, she paused, tilting her head to the side. When did it change? Hermione was always known to be logical, in control of her plans, methodological and cool. She was the girl who came up with back up plans for the backup; not the one to go charging wand blazing!
"My Lady?"

She shook her head. *Something to think about later. She frowned. And wonder about my emotions… I should have a book on Occlumency somewhere I can use…*

"Lady Hermione?"

Hermione turned and looked at the man who called her name. It was the same one who told her that Catelyn and Dacey were not with them in the dungeons; he was tall and tanned, despite his stay in the dungeons, with ears that stuck out just the tiniest amount. Hermione could tell because unlike many of the other Northern men, he wore his hair short. This accentuated his forehead and framed his long, narrow face that tapered off to a vaguely pointed, masculine chin.

"Sorry." She focused her attention on him, and his tattered purple-and-white clothes.

He eyed her for a moment and then said, "Donnel Locke, my Lady. What is our next move?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "Umber?"

The gruff man stepped forward and let his booming voice carry as he spoke: "We'll take a Portkey to our base, and from there you will be looked at by a Maester. Those deemed in serious need of rest will be sent to Riverrun, while the others will remain at the base as we go over plans to retake Winterfell."

"Let's get out of this courtyard and into the open space outside of the gate," suggested Hermione, "Where I can create a Portkey for us."

Some of the prisoners released needed some help, so a few of the men Hermione had brought with her became crutches on either side, but others, like Patrek, Lucas, and Daryn, shrugged off their injuries (if they had any - as they weren't telling her) to fall into place with Eddard. They formed an odd triangle behind Hermione, which had her glancing back at them in confusion several times.

Umber and Bolton led the way, and as they passed under the inner gate, Hermione wrinkled her nose at a stench, casting a nonverbal and wandless bubblehead charm as she did so. "Ugh. What's that smell?"

Blackwood, who was just a few paces ahead of Hermione, turned and pointed up. "Rotting heads from when the Mountain and his men attacked. Frey had them placed there before the summit meeting."

Hermione's eyes went wide, and as they passed through the gate to the other side, she jogged ahead a bit to turn and stare up at the sight. The Mountain's head was obvious, as she vividly remembered fighting him: his hair was long, waving a bit in the early morning breeze, but his eyes were pecked out from the birds, and his tongue was swollen, poking out from his lips. The flesh was greying and bloated.

She gagged, spinning around quickly and bringing her hands up to her mouth to avoid puking everywhere.

"My lady?" a few of the men were asking, prominently Eddard hovering at her side while chasing off anyone else who got too close. She waved them all off.

"Fine," she muttered, breathing in the fresh air her bubblehead provided, despite her memory providing her with the lingering stench, "I just wasn't expecting it."
"Well, at least Frey did something right," she heard Umber mutter.

"How so?" she asked, taking a deep breath.

Umber turned to her and pointed back up at the rotting head. "The Martells of Dorne will be damned pleased to know that the man responsible for raping and killing their sister is dead." He barked out a laugh. "But the Viper ain't going to be too happy at having lost the chance to kill the bastard himself!"

"Dorne?" asked Hermione, casting her mind back and trying to remember if Robb had ever said anything about them. "Who're they?"

"Prince Doran Martell of Dorne is their liege lord," explained Blackwood, watching Hermione carefully for signs that she was going to be sick. "His brother, Oberyn, is known as the Red Viper. Their younger sister married Rhaegar Targaryen, and was killed during the Lannister sack of the city at the end of the war."

"Oh," said Hermione. Oh indeed, she thought. I really need to start learning about the Houses here and how they're all connected to whatever happened during that war. Whatever it is, these people hold grudges that make the Weasleys and Malfoys look like a minor dispute.

Thoughtfully, Hermione turned back to the head. "I wonder…"

Then, she pointed her wand and cast four charms in succession: a severing charm that cut the base of the spike holding the Mountain's head, causing it to topple; a summoning charm to bring it towards her; and then a very quick levitating charm to hold it in place. She finished with a preservation charm.

"I never took you as one for spoils of war," commented Bolton idly, watching as she manipulated the head to hold it in place.

"I'm not," replied Hermione, glancing up. "But the Martells might be." She looked around the man watching her. "I need something that someone can spare."

"Like a handkerchief?" suggested Patrek with a cheeky grin, waving a square cloth he had tucked away.

"I really hope that wasn't some lady's favour," commented Hermione, eyeing it as she plucked it from his hand. "Because she's gonna be really mad."

There were some chuckles around them, but Hermione ignored it as she kept her levitating charm working at the same time as transfiguring the cloth into a square container, large enough to hold the Mountain's decapitated head.

Once completed, she dropped the head in and sealed it shut. The design on the outside of the box was simple: it was plain, boring wood, but along the top edge were intricate running wolves and the lid had the direwolf Stark sigil. The bottom edge had the sigils of the Riverlands and Northern houses that supported Robb's army, minus those who betrayed them.

Done, she looked up and said, "Let's get back."

A dizzying Portkey trip later, Lord Cerwyn, who was awaiting their return, greeted them. He gave a bit of a bow to Hermione and turned to address her first. "No problems reported by our patrol, my lady. Were you successful?"
"Moderately," she replied with a sigh. She turned to the large group that Portkeyed in with them. "Anyone injured - get to the tower. You'll be looked over by any Maesters who will either clear you to remain here, or to be sent to Riverrun. Those of you, who were with me last night on the assault team, get some rest."

"What about that, Lady Hermione?" asked Karstark, pointing at the box she had tucked on her hip. "I have a plan," she replied. "It won't take long if you'd like to come along." She glanced at Patrek Mallister. "You'd best come too, Patrek."

He nodded, and along with Bolton and Karstark, they followed Hermione and Cerwyn to her tent. Hermione placed the box on the table and turned to Cerwyn. "Can you bring Olyvar Frey here, please?"

He nodded and left, leaving Karstark to frown at her. "The Frey? What for?"

"Roslin said her brother didn't know anything about the attack," answered Hermione, busying herself as she walked around the tent's living space, particularly the comfortable armchair she had near the fire. "She said that under veritaserum, and I believe her. Olyvar served Robb faithfully."

Bolton scowled. "You are still going to test him, though?"

"Yes," she nodded. "But then if it turns out Roslin was right, Olyvar is going to have a task to complete and then we'll be done of the Freys." She looked at the men in the tent. "You'd best get comfortable."

Bolton and Karstark opted to sit in their seats at the table, near the head, while Patrek chose to stand by Hermione's side when Cerwyn returned with a visibly pale and shaking Olyvar Frey. His eyes darted from one person to the next, and his steps were hesitant and unsure as he moved further into the strange tent.

"M-My L-Lady," he stuttered, his eyes finding Hermione. Immediately, he dropped to his knees. The sudden move had Bolton and Karstark both reaching for their swords at their sides, and Patrek moved to stand in front of Hermione as a human shield. Olyvar kept his eyes on the floor as he spoke. "P-Please! You m-must believe m-me, m-my L-lady. I didn't know about the a-attack, a-at a-all. I would never betray His Grace!"

Hermione gently pushed Patrek out of the way. The young man grumbled as he moved, crossing his arms. "Your sister Roslin said that you were loyal."

Olyvar's head snapped up. "Ros? You - You spoke to Roslin?"

Hermione nodded. "She's well. Was asking after you."

"She was?" Olyvar closed his eyes in swallowed audibly in the quiet tent. "You - you will tell her that I served loyally and that I am ashamed of my family? You'll make my execution quick?"

"Execution?" Hermione frowned. "I'm not going to kill you, Olyvar. I'm going to ask you a few questions, and then you're going to do a job for me."

Olyvar's eyes popped open. "What?"

Hermione tilted her head at Karstark, who stood with a bottle in his hand. He knelt in front of Olyvar, cursing a bit about his old bones, but the young man obediently opened his mouth and swallowed the three drops.
The questions and answered that followed held true to Roslin's and Olyvar's words that he had no idea about the plan and had been willing to die for Robb. With that confirmed, Hermione gave the young man the antidote to the potion, and knelt in front of him, as the potion cleared his system and he focused on her.

"I'm going to be honest, Olyvar," began Hermione in a light tone, "No one here wants a Frey hanging around."

The young man blushed furiously, knowing exactly why. "I understand, my Lady."

"For the safety of everyone here, and you, I'm going to give you a task." She tilted her head at the table and Olyvar followed her line of sight, looking at the box. "You see that box? You're going to go deliver it to the Martells in Dorne."


Mentally shrugging, Hermione continued. "You're going to deliver that box to Prince Doran in Sunspear."

"I understand," said Olyvar, a firm tone to his voice.

"You must know, though, that once you leave the North and Riverlands, you're going to be blocked from returning," continued Hermione, "What with the wards over the Riverlands, and the fact that no one in the North will trust a Frey anymore."

Olyvar nodded, not speaking.

Hermione surveyed him a few moments longer, then nodded and stood. "Alright. Patrek here is going to go with you, dropping you off at his family seat in Seaguard, where you will get on a boat and travel to Dorne. Once the task is complete, you're free to go, Olyvar. You just can't come back."

There was a brief look of pity in her eyes. "Only forward."

Olyvar slowly got to his feet. "W-Will there be anything else, my Lady?"

"No Olyvar," said Hermione, shaking her head slowly. "But, for the record, I am sorry about this."

"About what-?"

Hermione had her wand out, and cast _stupefy_ before the young man could finish his sentence. He crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

"Well, now what?" asked Patrek, sarcastically, glancing back and forth between the prone body and the witch. "Because I'm not carrying him."

Hermione shot him a dirty look. "You're not going to carry him, Mallister. I'm going to erase his memory of this camp and anything that's happened since we arrived here a month ago. A month of lost memories is better than his entire life. I'll leave the order and his agreement to it, so he knows what he's supposed to do, but even if he attempted to find us, he wouldn't know where to look."

Mollified, the royal guard nodded.

"How long will he be unconscious?" asked Cerwyn curiously, having not really seen her spells in action before.

"Long enough for him to get on a boat and wake up once they're already in transit," replied
Hermione, leaning down and closing her eyes in concentration. She hated using *Obliviate*, given her history with what she did to her parents, but there was no other way to protect not only the army and their plans, but also Olyvar per her deal with Roslin.

Mentally, Hermione cast the spell and then felt the sensation of dual thoughts; even at rest, Olyvar's brain was functioning and he was aware that something was off. Hermione traced thoughts of Robb and herself back through the synapses and found the memories she needed. Once she felt secure that she scrubbed them, she withdrew, exhaling deeply.

"It's done." She moved to the armchair, collapsing in it. "Got any more handkerchiefs to spare?"

Karstark snorted and instead passed over a scrap of parchment without any writing on it - something left over from their planning on the attack. Hermione wandlessly summoned it, caught it in the air, and then infused it was the Portkey spell, making the parchment flash white briefly.

"Activation will be in three minutes, Patrek," she said, handing it to him and watching as he gingerly took the parchment, pinching it between his thumb and pointer.

There was a look of distaste, but he picked up Olyvar's body in a fireman's lift and held the box in his other arm. He surveyed those in the tent. "First boat I can put him on?"

Hermione nodded. "The first one heading to Dorne."

He sighed. "Well, it'll be nice to see father again. My thanks, Lady Hermio-"

And then he was gone, mid-sentence.

With a sigh, Hermione turned to those who remained in her tent. "Well, gentlemen, I don't know about you, but I'm going to take a hot shower and then sleep for a few hours. We will convene tomorrow to discuss the next step in retaking Winterfell." She frowned. "And finding Lady Stark and Dacey."

The men murmured their goodbyes; as the tent flap was pushed back behind Karstark, the last to exit, Hermione spotted Eddard and Daryn standing outside, their backs to her as they guarded the tent.

*Silly boys,* she thought with an eye roll as she stood, stretching, and popping her back. *Didn't they know that my tent is warded anyway? Only people I trust can enter.*

With a yawn, Hermione stumbled down the short hallway to the back of the tent, where the bathroom and bedrooms were. Although her initial plan was to wash the lingering feeling of the Trident from her skin, her drooping eyelids forced her to make her way to her small bedroom.

"Oy," she protested, half-heartedly, seeing that her bed was already occupied. "You've got two cots in the other room!"

The giant direwolf looked up and his long tail began wagging, thumping loudly whenever it hit against the side dresser table, his tongue lolling out.

With a sigh, Hermione eyed Grey Wind, stripping out of her trousers and top to remain in her bra and panties and then shoved at the grey wolf until he huffed and made room, curling instead up at the end of the cot, his back legs hanging half-off.

She pulled back the covers, snuggled in, and was lured into a dreamless sleep by the lingering warmth of Robb's direwolf, knowing that something was his was nearby.
Chapter End Notes

Also: I have a story called "Cursed Be this Soul (that Ties Us Together)". Please check it out and let me know what you think – it's a soulmate AU rarepair (did I just start a new ship?) of Hermione and Ned Stark.
Grimmauld Place was exactly how the name described it as: a grim, old place. Robb had been in some dour castles - the Crag coming to mind immediately - but nothing had prepared him for Hermione's realm or Grimmauld Place.

Side-Along Apparition once outside of Hogwarts' main gates was nauseating but manageable after all the times he had gone somewhere with Hermione, but the arrival on a narrow ledge in front of an imposing wooden door, of a house that looked exactly like all the others, had Robb frowning.

"How do you tell your home apart?" he asked, looking back and forth between number eleven and thirteen, seeing the identical fronts. At least with castles, forts, and holdfasts, they all had unique and different designs, thanks to the number of towers, or their location, or construction materials. This was probably like tracking down someone in Torrhen's Square.

"House numbers?" offered Harry, turning and opening the door himself. "Also, Grimmauld Place is hidden by magic from the Muggles - so only magicals can see it."

"But I'm not magical," protested Robb, eyeing the dark interior. And no one to open the doors? No guards? What a strange world.

"No, but you're with someone magical," answered Harry, stepping in and pulling Robb with him.

"And the stoop is the only place someone can appear when visiting if I haven't keyed them into the Floo address."

The what now? thought Robb, eyes looking around the inside of Harry's home critically and sussing out the best strategic places for him to stand or fight off an attack. Without his kingsguard behind him or those he trusted, he wasn't going to turn his back on anyone in this realm, however helpful they appeared.

The hallway was long and dark, with dark wood paneling halfway up the walls from the floor, with dark green for the rest to a wood-paneled ceiling, closing the room off. There were numerous doors along one side, all shut, and a slightly protruding, fraying curtains on the inside, hanging at eye level along the wall on the opposite side.

"Oh, try not to disturb her," said Harry idly, pointing at the curtains.

"Her?"

He nodded. "My godfather's mother. Her portrait's behind the curtains - we haven't found a way to remove her yet, so if the curtains open, she screams bloody murder and hurls insults at everyone. The only thing we've managed is to encase her with glass but we have to reinforce the silencing spells and constantly apply strengthening charms because after awhile she breaks through."

Robb gapped and wondered if he had actually died instead.

They walked past the last door on their left; on their right was a grand, winding wooden staircase that led upstairs, while on the left was a few short steps into a lowered kitchen. It was much brighter than
the hallway, with several windows looking out at ground height to a weedy garden.

It was very unlike Winterfell or Riverrun's kitchens, which was triple or quadruple in size to accommodate the many feasts the cooks had to prepare, as well as for the barracks and men at arms; but there was something nice about the Grimmauld kitchen.

The walls were whitewashed plaster, and any cupboards were a natural light wood grain. There was a stove, although smaller than what Robb knew and had a washbasin in a countertop. The majority of the kitchen was taken over by a large centerpiece with chairs around it. The back of the room opened up into a large dining room - although laughably small compared to the Halls he was used to, or even his family's private dining rooms at Winterfell - with a single table and several chairs around it, including a sideboard of some sort. That room was also whitewashed and well lit by the kitchen's natural light, although there was a hanging chandelier over the table.

"The Order of the Phoenix used to meet here," explained Harry, motioning for Robb to take one of the seats. He did so, his back to the wall and not the stairs or windows. Harry turned his back on him and opened a large cupboard door - inside Robb was shocked to see provisions, cans, and jars of food. "Hungry? I'm going to whip up something."

"Aye," said Robb, staring.

As the other man began pulling this and that from various cupboards, he began speaking to Robb, just to fill the silence. "Meetings would take place in the kitchen, but from what I was told by those who survived, it was always cramped when everyone would show up. So, once I officially inherited the house and the war was over, I moved in here as a primary residence and began doing some construction."

He glanced over at Robb with a grin. "You probably noticed the difference between these rooms and the hall, right?"

Robb nodded.

"Other than these rooms and a few bedrooms and toilets upstairs, I haven't changed much else," continued Harry brightly, moving to the stove. "Other than it taking time - and Hermione was helping me with the library and study - I'm also employed full time, so that reduces me to working on weekends."

_Weekends? What is a weekend?_ frowned Robb. "What is it that you do, Harry?"

"I'm an Auror trainee," he explained, cracking eggs into a pan, making some sort of egg dish with meats and vegetables by moving his wand and directing the pieces to float into the pan. He looked over his shoulder and saw Robb's face. "Anmnd that means nothing to you. Right; I enforce the law, hunt down those who break it and arrest them."

_Ah, thought Robb. "You are the King's justice. Or a knight."

"Erm," Harry's face was a bit startled and his eyes wide behind his glasses, a spatula moving on its own in the pan. "I… guess? We don't have a King - we have a Minister for Magic, and that's Kingsley, you'll meet him later - but I'm pretty low in the Quidditch team, you know? I'm just a trainee. There's then a full-fledged Auror, and then the Head Auror, and then the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"I… see," said Robb, although not quite; he was sure he was missing some of the finer points between the two cultures, but in the meantime, Harry slid the egg dish onto a plate which floated
across the room to him; a fork came next. Tentatively, Robb reached out and grabbed it as it hung suspended in the air and then motioned with his free hand towards the plate and fork, now both on the tabletop, "Is this normal?"

"Mm?"

Harry was at a seat across from Robb, already digging into his food.

"Using magic this way?"

The other man swallowed and nodded. "Yeah. You can use magic for just about everything, I suppose. It's harder for Hermione and me though."

"Oh?" Robb took a tentative bite.

"Well, both Hermione and I grew up in the Muggle world - I'll take you out later so you can see what London's like - but we never knew magic existed before we were told about it at eleven. Others, like Ron," at Robb's glance, Harry grinned. "So Hermione has mentioned us."

"Aye - she showed me a picture of the - Defense Association? Dumbledore's Army?" Robb confirmed. "The two were interchangeable."

"That's right. Officially we were the Defense Association, but to stick it to Umbridge, we called it Dumbledore's Army," Harry leaned back with a pleased sigh. "Ahh, those good ol' days when Hermione would jinx our recruitment sheets to permanently disfigure someone who betrayed our trust or when she sent a racist bigot out into the Forbidden Forest to piss off the centaurs." There was a fond look on Harry's face that had Robb frowning. "She always was a vicious thing when you pissed her off. I think Ron still has the scars from her canaries, too."

"Hermione?" asked Robb.

Harry nodded. He broke out into laughter at Robb's skeptical look. "Don't let her fool you - Hermione can be sweet and accommodating when she wants to be, but she has a lot of bad traits, too. She's stubborn, bossy, even arrogant in her belief that she's right no matter what, and condescending. She prefers logic to emotion, but she can burst into tears when the people she cares about are being stupid. She cares almost too much once she deems you worth her time. But that can also mean she'll slap you if you annoy her enough, too."

Thinking back to Hermione's emotional outbursts in his war room, as well as her frantic and then cold attitude at the Crag, Robb found that to be a good reflection of the woman. "You care for her a lot."

Harry nodded, cleaning off his plate and motioning to Robb's empty one, which he pushed away. A wave of the man's wand had them floating back to the sink, where a scrubber and soap began washing the dishes and cutlery clean. "I owe her my life, many times over. I love her."

Robb's stomach clenched. "Oh?"

"Did she ever tell you about our first year? How we met and became friends and then how we stopped Voldemort?"

Robb shook his head.

"Oh, you're in for some stories," grinned Harry, and it looked a bit wicked. "She's gonna kill me when she finds out I've told all this…"
For the next several hours, Harry spent the time telling Robb about his adventures at Hogwarts, and the exploits they experienced. At one point, Harry broke out a bottle of Ogden's Firewhiskey, which Robb was quite impressed by, burping out smoke rings to Harry's delight and admiration.

The two were finishing a story, laughing uproariously, when others meandered into the kitchen.

"- kept going 'levi-o-aaaaah' until Hermione had enough and tried to correct him. But of course he went, 'if you're so clever, you do it then' and she does," laughed Harry, making Robb snort into his shot glass, right before he was about to take a sip. "And then there's Hermione, all smug and whatever, perfect grip and glancing with this smirk on her mouth."

"Really? We're telling that story?"

Robb turned to see a tall redhead step into the kitchen, a scowl on his mouth as he surveyed the two. Behind him came a few others as the noise level increased from the quiet of Robb and Harry to a gaggle of others. There was a redhead girl, clearly family to the first redhead, who came up and kissed Harry on the cheek; a tall, broad-shouldered man with brown hair who greeted the redhead and Harry with back slaps and "Harry! Good to see you, mate," and "Ron! How's it been?" closely followed by a dreamy-looking blonde, who strode right up to him and said, "You have very few wrackspurts. That's a good sign."

"Er, thanks?" replied Robb, taken aback.

"Harry, dear!" a matronly redhead with streaks of grey bustled into the kitchen, and immediately with a flick of her wand pots and pans went soaring overhead and the stove turned on and the faucet ran water. "You're too skinny, dear. Have you had dinner yet? No? I'm going to do a roast - no, no, you just sit there. I'll take care of it all."

And then there was McGonagall, walking in and talking to a black man in a purple robe trimmed with gold; a stately woman with curly hair like Hermione's, only it was jet-black and she had a straining toddler on her hip whom she immediately passed over to Harry, who took the babe with a wide smile; and many more Robb couldn't stop to discern from his seat.

The noise washed over him and his eyes went wide as the cacophony had him pushing his chair back until he was well away from the table and able to make a dash for escape if needed. Not everyone went to the kitchen, many others pulled out seats at the dining table, and others clustered into groups where they caught up with others.

Even as King in the North, in a crowded Hall during a feast, never had Robb felt as claustrophobic as he did at that moment, watching as magic was used thoughtlessly to make a meal - dishes, cutlery, knives, ingredients flying above all their heads and mixing together - or creating a cloud of pink smoke with a loud bang, making those around the devilishly grinning redhead laugh - or around the babe in Potter's lap, who turned his hair blue, making the women around him coo - or -

"It can be overwhelming, can't it?"

Robb grimaced and turned to the man who stood next to him, leaning against the kitchen wall as he watched the crowd, even as more people turned up from the front door, calling out hello's and how do you do's?

"Aye," said Robb simply, eyeing the black man as he stuck his hand out. Recognizing it from earlier, he reached out and shook the hand tentatively.

"Kingsley Shackelbolt," the man introduced himself.
"Robb Stark," he replied, deciding against King in the North. "Harry mentioned you earlier. You're their leader?"

Shacklebolt chuckled, a deep, low sound. "Ah - well, in a manner of speaking. I'm the Minister for Magic, so I'm the leader of magical Britain, but in terms of the Order of the Phoenix, I'd say McGonagall leads us with input from myself and Arthur." He pointed at an older man with thinning red hair and a receding hairline.

"And all these people are here for... for Hermione?" he asked, stumbling a bit at the end, eyes taking in the colourful robes and mixed clothing.

The man nodded. "We all love her. Getting her back is a priority." He then eyed the man next to him. "And sending you home, too, of course."

Robb gave him a tight smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Of course."

Then someone was shouting and people were scrambling for seats in the dining area, others hovering in the kitchen near where finger foods were being floated out. One was a tall, burly redhead, and as he reached for a meat snack, the matronly redhead smacked the back of his hand with her wand.

"Charlie, no!"

Robb found himself at the dining table, in an uncomfortable seat with his back to the closed dining door (which must have led back to the hallway, he surmised), next to McGonagall on one side and Harry on his other.

"Settle down, settle down," the woman's gravelly voice called, and everyone began to settle.

"She's probably taught everyone in this room," whispered Harry to him with a grin. "We've all been at the end of her 'professor' voice."

"Indeed, Mr. Potter."

Harry blushed and some people laughed.

"Now, while I realize that the war is over, and the Order of the Phoenix is not needed," the woman began, carefully looking at everyone, "let us call this an informal meeting regarding the disappearance of Ms. Granger and begin to brainstorm ways to get her home in light of new information."

"New information?" called a voice - it was the man who tried to take some food, Charlie. "What information is that, Professor?"

Both she and Harry turned to Robb, who patiently eyed them back. Harry cleared his throat. "Erm - well - that is - it turns out Dumbledore."

"Professor Dumbledore," interrupted an arrogant looking redhead.

Harry sighed. "Right, sorry, Percy - Professor Dumbledore - may have been right about where Hermione is." At the blank looks around the room, and a grumble from the lanky redhead next to Harry's seat as he crossed his arms, Harry expanded: "He thought that because we couldn't find her, and no spell could either, that she was in another world."

There was some silence, and then: "I beg your pardon, my boy?" stuttered a rather large, round man in robes who came with McGonagall.
"Everyone, this is Robb Stark," introduced Harry, and Robb rose to his feet to look at everyone like he was surveying his Lords in his war room, "King in the North. He's from… from another universe, one where Hermione is right now. He said she's been with him and his army for the past year - the same length of time she's been gone from ours."

Almost immediately, people began shouting, talking over one another. Robb was a bit shocked and wide-eyed at the disorganization the group descended into - there were no rules or respect given to their leaders. He would never allow his men to go on like this!

A loud bang erupted in the room and silenced everyone. Shacklebolt stood with his wand raised, its tip smoking slightly. "Now then," he began, his eyes coolly sweeping the room, "Let's be reasonable and intelligent about this. Yes, Longbottom?"

The brown-haired, broad-shouldered young man who greeted Harry earlier had his hand partially raised, indicating he wanted to speak Robb supposed and cleared his throat once eyes were on him, shifting uncomfortably. "Ah - thank you Minister - could you - that is, could you expand on what you mean by 'another universe'?"

Harry nodded at Robb, who, reluctantly, began to speak. "I am from a place called Westeros. Magic does not exist in the way that you seem to have control of it. In fact, much of the magic in our world is gone for many centuries. There is no divide between magical realms and non-magical ones."

The dreamy blonde who spoke to him of wrackspurts looked thoughtful from her place next to Longbottom. On her other side was another redhead with longish hair and a fang earring, and scars across his face. He frowned and leaned back in his seat, just as the gorgeous blonde on his other side whispered something into his ear.

"So how'd you get here then?"

The question came from the belligerent redhead next to Harry - Hermione's other best friend, Ron. He had his arms crossed on the table and was looking around Harry to stare at him with an unreadable expression on his face.

"I don't know," replied Robb shortly, in clipped tones. "We were attacked a peace summit at the Twins -"

"The where?"

Robb sighed. "It's a castle held by the Freys, men sworn to my uncle. However, they betrayed us and attacked my men and I. Hermione and I had planned for emergency Portkeys in case anything was necessary going forward, and when those Portkeys were activated, I ended up -"

He turned to McGonagall, who answered, "In the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid found him." She nodded at the back of the large group, where a very large man - Robb was sure he had giant's blood in him - nodded as well in agreement.

Robb continued, "I was badly injured, and kindly healed at Hogwarts."

There was silence around the dining room as those in the Order of the Phoenix and the Defense Association all took in the news of Robb's travelling to a different dimension - with one exception.

"HA!" cried out Luna loudly, her face flushed rose as she pumped her fist in the air and stood in one movement, causing everyone to turn and look at her. Her dreamy expression was one of triumph, of utter conviction, and she looked far more coherent than she had when Robb first met her.
Warily, Harry asked, "Luna...?"

The blonde beamed at the table, unconcerned at how some shifted away or the open-mouth looks they gave her. "Dimensional rifts, Harry!"

"Loony," muttered Ron, falling back into his seat with a heaving sigh and looking up at the ceiling.

"If you mean Robb's from a different dimension, we knew that already Luna," gently chided Harry, looking at her with worry.

Luna shook her blonde hair out. "No, no, Harry - you're not seeing! Forests! Trees! They are the key!"

"I'm lost," someone in the crowd said.

Luna's brilliant look began to shift into dismay as she looked around the room - except -

The redhead with the fang earring was nodding, slowly, a thoughtful look on his face. "Professor, where did Hermione disappear from?"

McGonagall blinked behind her glasses. "The Forbidden Forest. I had sent her in there to look for the centaurs. They had scattered after the battle, what with Grawp tearing things up during the battle -"

Robb sat up straight as he realized what Luna was trying to say. "And we were supposed to end up in the Wolfswood - a forest," he explained for the confused looks. "Hermione came out in my dimension in a forest! The Whispering Woods!"

Luna grinned at him and he grinned back.

"Trees!" she repeated.

"I don't get it," someone said.

But now Longbottom was nodding slowly, something spreading across his face. "The Forbidden Forest is old magic - it was there long before Hogwarts was. And trees are sacred."

Ron groaned under his breath. "Of course Neville would turn this into herbology..."

Harry shushed him. "What do you mean, Neville?"

But there were disjointed, broken sentences emerging from not only Neville and Luna, but the redhead with the fang, and then others, including Robb, all chiming in as they began to figure it out:

"-we're talking about a nemeton-"

"-no, not a nemeton, but definitely a sacred space-"

"-we have that, it's called a godswood, with a weirwood heart tree-"

"-a world tree? Yggdrasil?-"

"-branched off, there are different worlds and planes of existence-"

"-suggesting that this is one of them-"
"-there are faces in the wood-

"-watchers?-

"-more like keepers, maybe? Spiritual guides?-

There was a loud bang and the excited chatter of those who were talking over one another with their ideas stopped abruptly and turned to the Minister, who again had to gain the attention of those in the room.

However, his eyes were bright, and his teeth white against his dark skin as he grinned widely at them. "And I think we now have a direction to move in. Luna, Neville, Bill, Fleur, Professor Flitwick - why don't you join with Robb and form a research group regarding nemetons and godswoods? Percy, you, Arthur, and I will check with the archives in the Ministry and see if there is any documentation about sacred groves and forests and dimensional shifts. Headmistress, perhaps you and Professor Slughorn can do the same at Hogwarts?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "And what about me, Kingsley? That's my best friend stranded in another universe."

"Us, you mean," said Ron, standing to join with Harry as they stared down the Minister.

Shacklebolt smiled. "Well, you do have access to Grimmauld Place, Harry - with a library that has some of the darkest and ah - let's say unique - magic on hand? Perhaps you and several others can make this our base of operations and search the library here?"

It was like had broken the spell on those in the room - people began rising from their seats, moving to and fro, breaking into groups and then smaller ones as leaders naturally emerged, beginning to discuss and dish out tasks.

Robb felt excitement race up and down his spine as he realized that while his world was significantly different to Hermione's, that magic was able to bridge some of those cultural gaps and give them their first, and best, lead in how to return him home.

"Well," said Hermione, sitting back on her heels, as she stared into Grey Wind's yellow eyes, "I think you're about as healed as you're going to be without Robb around, Grey Wind."

The large direwolf chuffed deeply, his tongue lolling out from where he lounged on her cot, having spent his time in her room of the tent recovering from the crossbow bolts and arrows that had incapacitated him during the attack at the Twins.

As Hermione had ensured that Daryn had both her fake wand and Grey Wind, the man had left the Hornwood men at arms in charge of Grey Wind while he took his spot inside as the King's guard. Luckily, Daryn's men had not touched a lick of alcohol during the summit and were able to defend the wolf.

"Come on, up you get," she ordered, standing up. Grey Wind turned his yellow eyes on her and whined a bit. "Stop it - you need to get stronger and having a bit of a walk will do you good."

Grey Wind lowered his head and looked up at Hermione.

She stared back with her hands on her hips.

"I am used to stubborn animals, Grey Wind," said Hermione slowly, narrowing her eyes. "Let me
tell you about Crookshanks, hmm?"

"My lady?" called a voice from the front of the tent.

Hermione scowled at the direwolf, who now rolled onto his side, completely taking up the cot from pillow to base, his tail swishing back and forth. "Next time," she hissed, turning and exiting the room. Standing just inside the flap were Karstark, Bolton, Cerwyn, and Umber, with Eddard Karstark just on the inside, eyeing them all.

"My apologies, my lady," her new guard and Torrhen's brother said, eyeing the older men, including his father, with some distrust. "But they said they have a meeting with you?"

"That's right," said Hermione brightly, even as her eyes darted from one man to the next. "They can come in. Thanks for reminding me, Edd. Speaking of, who's out there with you? Have you slept yet?"

Eddard looked a bit bewildered, blinking at Hermione and shaking his head back and forth slowly. His blonde-ish hair had come out from where it was tied back, most likely from him running his hand through it overnight, and his square face was pale. "It's Lord Daryn, my lady. And um - no. No, we haven't broken fast yet. Lord Lucas will be taking over the watch, along with the Smalljon."

Hermione hummed and looked at the others, who were making their way to their seats at the table, including Cley Cerwyn who seemed to be fitting in well. Karstark shook his head. "We haven't eaten yet, either, my lady."

"In that case…"

Hermione moved to her kitchen, motioning for Eddard to bring Daryn in, and then all but pushed them into the two armchairs that framed the fireplace in the living area of the tent (Hermione was even more worried and compassionate towards Daryn, who had lost the majority of his left arm in the attack at the Twins and had needed two Maesters' help, along with her potions, to sedate him and heal the wound. Even now, he was unbalanced and unable to handle anything more than a dagger, but was up on his feet and reporting to his duties against the healer's advice.). The two guards, half-stricken by her manhandling, and half-bemused, did as she bade, and then all the men watched in complete befuddlement as Hermione - by default, who had become a leader amongst them - began to cook and serve them breakfast.

She decided on a simple fry-up, using her magic freely with some charms that Molly Weasley taught her and others she picked up watching the Weasley matron in Grimmauld Place years ago. While she directed her wand for some non-battle magic, she opened their morning discussion, floating two mugs of strong tea to Daryn and Eddard; milk and sugar followed, trailing after the mugs like ducklings.

"With the Freys no longer being a problem, we can concentrate on Winterfell," she said, directing plates to fly and land in front of the men. Karstark immediately snatched his hands off the table where they were folded to put them on his lap just as his plate landed. "What do we know of Winterfell so far?"

Umber gave Bolton some stink eye. "It's being held by his son."

Bolton's cold look would've frozen Umber but instead, the man smirked back. "And likely those that follow him."

"How many numbers?" asked Cerwyn, eyes narrowed in thought.
"Fifty or so," replied Bolton tersely. "But they are likely vicious creatures, no doubt barely leashed animals."

"Fitting," rumbled Umber.

Hermione eyed the sneering large man and the cool stare from Bolton and intervened. "Enough! Lord Umber - clearly Lord Bolton had no idea what his son was going to do. Lord Bolton, ignore Umber being uncouth and insulting; frankly, it's beneath him and childish."

Both men glared at each other a moment longer and then looked away, Umber mumbling an apology.

"Engaging even fifty men in a full-scale attack could be dangerous," said Cerwyn, breaking the short tension that fell over the group. "Winterfell is a strong castle - and fifty men could hold the inner towers easily, even if our men broke through the lines."

Hermione served the food, the frying pan skittering off the stovetop and launching itself towards the table where Karstark flinched violently as it appeared at his side, slipping sideways as a spatula dished out eggs, sausages, and bacon, while two pieces of cut toast framed the plate. He stared at the food and gingerly poked at it with a fork.

"The Ironborn took it," argued Daryn, noisily slurping his tea from the armchair.

"With grappling hooks and the cover of darkness as they slipped in," argued Umber. "That's hardly honourable."

Karstark made a face, but carefully spooned a bit of food in his mouth. Bolton and Cerwyn were watching him, and when he made a pleasant expression, they too joined in on their breakfast.

"If only we could get inside Winterfell without anyone knowing," sighed Karstark around his meal. "If no one knew what our plan was, then neither would Ramsay. He wouldn't expect it."

"We could lessen any casualties that way," agreed Cerwyn, leaning back. "Winter is Coming."

Hermione nodded, slipping into her own seat with her plate of food. "You want a Trojan horse."

"A what?" echoed Umber.

Hermione began cutting her meats methodologically and focused on that as she spoke. "The Trojan War - Helen of Troy was kidnapped - or ran away, stories vary depending to which side you listen to - and her Sparta husband went to war with Troy. The war took place over ten years, and finally, the Greeks - Sparta - constructed a large wooden horse, which was also their sigil, I guess the closest would be, and snuck their men inside it and left it as a victory trophy. At night when Troy was asleep, the Greeks snuck out of the horse, opened the gates for the rest of their army, and destroyed Troy, ending the war."

There was an uncomfortable look on the Northmen's faces. "That's hardly honourable - not meeting the enemy in the face during battle," said Umber slowly.

Hermione looked up at Umber and said, coolly, "All war is deception."

Bolton, a glint in his eyes and an empty plate in front of him asked, "Are those your words, my Lady?"

"No," said Hermione, shaking her head. "They're Sun Tzu's."

Realizing none at the table knew who
that was, or really cared, she made no explanations. Instead, Hermione mentally shelved their plan for infiltrating Winterfell - via Trojan horse - to asked, "Is there anything else we should know or be aware of?"

Cerwyn nodded. "Lord Hoster and I were able to finish our census but Lord Bracken was able to give ravens from Riverrun to Lord Blackwood to pass on. There has been news from the Wall."

The Northern men at the table all sat up straight. "What of it?" asked Karstark.

"There was a Great Ranging," explained Cerwyn, and Hermione could hear the capitals in his words.

Frowns appeared on all the men's faces, and Hermione looked around the room in confusion. "What's a Great Ranging?" she asked.

"It's a massive expedition led by the Commander," explained Cerwyn, turning to Hermione and taking in her inquisitive expression. "Maester Aemon writes that the Wall needs more men, as Lord Commander Mormont took nearly a third of all the Black Brothers with him beyond the Wall."

"What was the purpose?" asked Umber, a deep frown on his face behind his white beard.

"Wildlings are on the move," answered Cerwyn, glancing down at his notes. "Several Rangers have gone missing in the past two years, including First Ranger Benjen Stark, and Bronze Yohn Royce's son, Waymar, on his first range beyond."

Cerwyn then looked uncomfortable as he cleared his throat and shifted in his seat, explaining the rest of the letter from the Night's Watch. "There is a King Beyond the Wall, a former Brother."

Hisses escaped Karstark and Eddard from his seat by the fire, which had lulled Daryn into a light snore.

_That can't be good_, thought Hermione. "A King Beyond the Wall? I suppose that is something of a novelty and not good?"

"Wildlings don't kneel," replied Bolton in his low, whispy voice. "Ever. If they are -"

"What made them change and decide to do so?" answered Hermione rhetorically. She sighed. "I see." She then looked at Cerwyn. "There's more?"

"Aye, unfortunately," the curly-haired man sighed.

"Brilliant," grumbled Umber.

"Maester Aemon," began the man, a grimace on his face, "Writes that brothers found the bodies of two lost brothers, from Benjen Stark's party. And they - erm -"

Everyone, other than Daryn, who was asleep, was staring at Cerwyn.

"Well?" demanded Karstark. "Spit it out, man!"

Cerwyn looked at his paper and sighed. "That they reanimated as wights."

Skeptical looks passed between Bolton, Umber, and Karstark.

Hermione, however, frowned. "Reanimated? He used that word specifically?"
"Aye, my Lady," replied an unhappy Cerwyn.

She looked around the table and the very disbelieving looks that the other men were giving Cerwyn. She looked back and forth for a moment before asking, "I take it reanimated corpses aren't popular here, then?"

That made everyone turned to her in surprise. She met their stares, and summoned Confronting the Faceless, Snape's sixth year Defense text, and had the book rustle its pages past until it landed on images of an Inferi horde. Like all wizarding pictures, it moved.

Karstark physically pushed away from the table when the book and image came into his line of sight, his chair skidding several inches. Bolton's faced paled further, although he stared at the image, and Umber swore loudly enough that Daryn woke up with a snort.

"Gods preserve us," muttered Cerwyn once he saw the images, looking at Hermione with wide eyes. "My Lady, you have wights in your land?"

"They're called inferius, or inferi," she sighed, looking down at the images. "I never fought them, but my best friend, Harry, did when he was sixteen. Fire is the only thing that stops them, and even then, it was difficult, he said. " She looked at the men with a wry twist of her lips. "Magic can be wondrous, or monstrous."

Silence fell in the tent.

"Normally I wouldn't even entertain the idea that wights exist," began Karstark quietly, his hands shaking as he carefully brought his seat back to the table, "Because the idea that they do - well, it means that... that the Others might be as well."

The other men at the table met his wide-eye stare equally.

Hermione traced the edge of the image of the inferi horde shuffling their way forward towards the person taking the photo, the decomposed bodies lumbering in their gait and their empty jaws hanging loose and gapping as skeletal fingers reached forward. Monstrous, indeed.

"I suggest we send someone to the Wall to confirm this information with Maester Aemon," said Bolton carefully, after a moment's consideration. "Perhaps even bring back a -" he swallowed, "-a specimen if possible?"

Umber nodded furiously. "Aye, that would be best. Then - then we'd know."

There was an uneasy feeling in the room as they stared at each other, and it felt like the room's temperature had dropped because Hermione immediately had gooseflesh and rubbed her arms to warm her up.

"Who?" asked Cerwyn thought thin, almost bloodless lips that slightly trembled as he spoke.

"A Flint?" suggested Karstark. "And perhaps your son, Lord Umber? And a Mormont? The three of your houses are closest to the Wall. You have much better relations with the Watch than someone from a much more southern house."

"Lady Mormont is currently at Greywater," said Hermione, drumming her fingers on the image of the inferi and ignoring the way that they tried to bite her through the photo. Karstark glanced over, saw it, and flinched violently. "I can Apparate down and bring her, as well as Lords Darry and Forrester back with their men and then they can set off immediately. A smaller host can travel without suspicion."
"Perhaps they can go at the same time as our attack on Winterfell?" asked Bolton. "So there is less attention on them?"

Hermione nodded, as did the others. "Then that's settled."

She slammed the book shut and there was a general sigh of relief.

"Now. Who wants to explain what a wight is and the Others are to me and why it scares the dickens out of all of you?"

That uneasy look was back between the men at the table, with Karstark finally finding his voice first, beginning with a tentative, "Well, you see, Lady Hermione, it all began over eight thousand years ago, when a great and terrible darkness fell across the world…"

A month later (and 4 chapters ago...):

Winterfell was a hive of activity as more and more people Portkeyed in from Riverrun. Hermione watched as the clusters of men appeared outside the main gates, which were manned by several Stark bannermen, happy to once more be home. She stood just on the inside of the gates, on the ground level, with Lucas Blackwood following her.

The whole thing of Robb's guard was becoming tedious, but she figured that without someone to guard, they were feeling anxious and latched onto her like chicks. So, she spared little thought to the men and left them to their guarding, except to tell whoever was following her to get some food or go to sleep if they hit the twelve-hour mark.

With her stood Maege Mormont, the Smalljon Umber, and Lord Robin Flint, representatives of the Houses chosen to be envoys to the Wall. Standing vigilantly beside Maege, however, were two young women Hermione had vaguely seen around the camp but never interacted with.

The younger of the two was lithe, but tall, reaching her mother's shoulders, with long curly brown hair that was shades lighter than Dacey's dark brown. Like all Mormont women, she was dressed in men's trousers and a tunic and furs, but her clothes were trimmed and fitted to suit her body type. The girl had an angular face; but unlike her mother and Dacey, her chin ended in a point. Her eyes were wide and brown, but despite the doe-like look the girl had, the two short daggers at her side and the bow slung over her back indicated she was a Mormont through and through.

The other young woman - closer to Hermione's own age (as Dacey had been in her mid-twenties at least) - had short-cropped dark brown hair that brushed her chin with end curls pointing point. Her face was far more serious and solemn, with a blunted chin and narrow blue eyes under a heavy brow. She stood shorter than her mother and was on par to height with her sister, but the difference between the other girl's lithe body was apparent in the square, firm way this young woman was holding herself, boldly meeting everyone's eyes and standing with her legs apart in a power pose. Her clothing was like the other Mormont women, with a thick leather belt encircling her trim waist where two short swords, similar to Dacey's gladius, hung. She was a dual-wielder.

"It's best you leave shortly," Hermione was explaining to Lady Maege, the Smalljon, and Lord Flint, "and make to your cousins in the Northern Mountains to resupply before heading to Castle Black."

They were nodding. Lady Mormont then turned to the two girls at her side and said, "As I will be going North, my Lady, I would like my eldest here to take my place in your council and as the head of my men."

Hermione glanced curiously at the shorthaired woman - she and Dacey hadn't really spoken of
family in the short time Dacey actually could stand to be around her.

"This is Lyra," introduced Maege, pride in her voice, "And Jorelle will remain behind as well, continuing to fight alongside the men."

"Of course," agreed Hermione, her lips quirking into a small smile. "It's always nice to have more female representation around."

Lyra's own lips twitched upwards briefly.

Maege, Smalljon, and Robin Flint all left shortly thereafter, back out the gates of Winterfell towards where a small number of horses had been penned together in a very hastily made stable and then were specks disappearing north.

Hermione turned to Lyra and Jorelle. "Well, Lord Cerwyn and Lord Karstark seem to think that they found a room that we can use for a war council, but I'm going to have to make changes to it. Do you want to come?"

Jorelle, despite her open face, shook her head, and said in a cool tone, "I'm going to see what our men are up to."

_Mormont women, thought Hermione, they either get along with me - like Lady Mormont - or seem to hate my guts, like Dacey and this one._

Lyra, on the other hand, nodded. "I will." Despite the suspicious glint in her eyes, she was also curious. "Will you be using magic?"

"Yes," said Hermione, watching Jorelle walk away. She turned to Lyra. "If all goes to plan, we'll be able to have our first meeting tonight with _all_ the members of the army."

Lyra hummed but followed Hermione, who met with Lord Karstark just off the Great Hall. He nodded once at Maege's daughter, and turned on his heel, motioning Hermione to come abreast with him.

"This way, yo- my Lady," the man stumbled partially through, and Lyra sent him a narrow-eyed look, but Hermione was oblivious, already thinking about how she wanted the room to look once they stepped inside.

The room itself was small, up two circular flights of wide stairs, the winding well with windows filled with stained glass featuring the history of the Starks. At the top as a circular room, which fit Hermione's plans, and several windows that faced North, over the Wolfswood and towards the Northern Mountains and the Wall.

There was a large hearth on the southern wall, beside the wooden door leading into the room, but off to the side and jutted into the corner, cutting a portion of the room with its triangular shape. In the middle of the room was a small, circular table, just as Hermione had asked, and two matching wooden chairs in a dark finish and tattered cushion - it must have come from some storage or had been ravaged when the Greyjoy contingent overtook the castle.

However, a few extension spells here, used to modify rooms (and, though Hermione would never admit to it, her bag), along with construction stabilizers she learned from Bill and Charlie in the early days of fixing up Hogwarts, there, and the room was triple its size and growing. Lyra and Karstark watched in awe as the room pushed back and out, the circle widening exponentially.

Karstark, shaking his head, stepped out of the room and down a few steps to crank open one of the
glass windows without a colourful history montage on it, peering out into the cool air. "Seven Hells!"

"What?" shouted back Hermione, swishing her wand once more. The table then began to grow, and grow, and grow.

"The room hasn't changed its size from the outside!" cried Karstark, coming back into the room. He was shaking his salt-and-pepper hair in bemusement. "My Lady, you, and your magic never fail to amaze me."

"Aye, but what are you doing?" questioned Lyra, her head tilted to the side as she watched the table soon take up a good part of the room.

Hermione grinned, pointing her wand at the chair, and then suddenly multiples were popping up, bits of dust and debris from the room - stone chips, loose rocks - began to form the numerous chairs. Lyra was counting them all and lost track somewhere around thirty-four as more and more popped up and slid into place around the very round table.

The finishing touches to the room was snapping her fingers to ignite the kindle and wood in the hearth, as well as lighting all the candles in the room; the glass windows opened and a cool breeze swept through the room, taking the must and damp, mingling with the heat and warmth of the fire to create a pleasant atmosphere.

"I think we're done," she said quietly, surveying her work. She turned to Karstark and Lyra, both of whom were eyeing her. "Let's call the Lords here, shall we? It's time for the Great Council."

TBC...
Arya was the first in the room. She had been Apparated over by Hermione personally, who explained that Winterfell was hers until Robb returned. Brienne took a Portkey with Edmure, who left his Castellan in charge of Riverrun for the evening while he attended the war council.

As such, Hermione hung back as she watched Arya move through the bustling crowd of Winterfell, her eyes wide and hand trembling as she ran it along familiar rails or stones, or clench in anger at something that was burnt or misplaced. Eventually, Hermione nudged her towards the antechamber that they repurposed with magic for the war room.

With help from Cerwyn, Karstark, and Blackwood, who returned from the Riverlands, they had stuck several enlarged maps of Westeros on the bare walls between windows, including smaller ones that gave a far more detailed cartographic look of the area. There was even a low bookshelf, taken from Hermione's tent, which had several rolls of scrolls and, through her improvisation, hard binders that she would use to maintain a working census of their armies.

Arya was agog as she stepped into the room, her mouth open and grey eye wide as her head moved back and forth, taking in the enlarged space. Her wavy dark brown hair was similar to Lyra's, brushing her chin as it grew out from her choppy cut when she was pretending to be a boy. It made her look younger than the fourteen-year-old actually was.

"What do you think?" Hermione asked, hands clasped in front of her.

"This is amazing!" replied Arya, moving around the table. "But why is this round? Where will Robb sit?"

"I think you mean, where will I sit," Hermione corrected gently, "As you're leading the North and Riverlands now. The idea of a round table means that there isn't one person making all the decisions - like you would have at the head of a table. Everyone's voice here is equal."

There was a frown on Arya's face. "How will that work?"

Hermione shrugged. "I guess we'll find out tonight if it's possible. You are still the defining vote, Arya - so if you really hate something, it'll be vetoed."

"Vetoed?" Arya scrunched her face up. "You sound so strange."

Hermione's expression was wry. "Benefits of coming from another world. It means 'to be removed,'
in the context of the conversation. So, if you really don't like an idea-"

"Then it goes away," the younger girl finished, nodding. "Got it."

"Great," replied Hermione. She then gestured out with a sweep of her hand to the table. "So where do you want to sit?"

"Anywhere?" Arya confirmed, glancing back.

Hermione nodded.

Eventually, after walking the entire table from start to finish, which took some time, Arya chose a seat opposite the doors, her back to the wall but between two windows. She stood beside the chair, looking at Hermione curiously.

"Sit in it," the witch instructed, and Arya, gingerly, pulled the chair out and did so. As soon as she sat on the lumpy and misshapen cushion, the magic Hermione had infused in the seat morphed it: the cushion firmed up and became Stark grey. The magic travelled up the arms and back of the seat until it reached the top. At the top of the seat, which was easily seen given Arya's height, the empty oval, which faced inward, changed to reflect the Stark sigil.

Arya's face lit up at seeing her family sign, and she knelt on the seat as she turned to run her fingers over it.

She was still doing so when the others began to trickle in. Brienne came first, sussing out Arya and moving to stand behind her seat as her guard, and then Bolton by himself, with Karstark and Umber, and then Marq Piper and Edmure next.

Hermione stood off to the side, just behind several of the chairs and against a wall, watching. She had asked those she was close to, to pick seats spread out around the table, so it didn't look like they were lumping together on one 'side' of the table. Karstark, with Eddard, apparently agreed, moving to sit at least ten chairs down from Arya on her left. Edd stood behind him as a guard and then, a moment later, locked eyes on Hermione with a tilt, wondering if she needed him nearby.

She shook her head and turned back to the others.

Everyone gave Arya's seat a wide berth except Edmure, who sat two down from her right, leaving a space between them. Umber and Lyra took seats opposite of them at the table, and slowly, people began to fill the empty spaces, but there were many empty seats despite the show of people.

Low chatter filled the room, some exclaiming loudly as they felt their seats change or the sigils appeared at the top of their chairs.

At one point, Arya turned to Hermione. "Is that everyone?" Her eyes were bright as she looked over a large amount of Lords in attendance.

Hermione, who had been doing a mental headcount, nodded slowly. "Yes, I believe so. Some can't make it due to their injuries, or we don't know where they are."

Arya then looked at Hermione. "Then when are you going to sit down?"

Hermione looked back at her in surprise. "Me?"

The look Arya gave Hermione made the older woman feel about two inches tall - in fact, Hermione thought that the young Stark's glare was eerily familiar to that of McGonagall's 'I'm disappointed in
you' look - that Hermione immediately scrambled into the seat Arya pointed out. It wasn't until she sat down that she had a momentary panic attack - *how are the others going to take this?*

Hermione surreptitiously looked, but none seemed to be turning red in the face at her seating arrangement, so Hermione sighed and began to relax against the chair, idly noting that hers didn't change to represent a sigil above her head.

"Why are you looking upset?"

Hermione turned to Arya and then glanced at their seats. "You are sitting to my right; I'm sitting to your left. Do you know what that implies?"

Arya shook her head.

"You've pretty much said that you are my right-hand woman," answered Hermione with a small upturn to her lips. "Instead of being the leader making the decisions, you've just told everyone based on this seating arrangement you're letting me give you orders."

*And, when Robb returns, if I'm still in this seat to his left, it's in the position of a consort - the right arm is the blade, and the left the shield,* finished Hermione mentally, but she quickly scrubbed that as she turned to see Arya's reaction.

The younger girl was frowning. "Wasn't that in the will anyway?"

Chuckling, Hermione nodded. "Yes. And speaking of, how about we begin with that, so everyone knows what the rules of succession are here? Remember - delegate. You don't have to do *everything.* Just start us off."

Arya grinned back, nearly bouncing in her seat. Taking that as her cue, Hermione channeled some of her magic into her hand, letting it build up. Then, she raised her hand to eye level and snapped her fingers - just once. The magic amplified the sound and the loud *snap* echoed in the chamber, bringing everyone's attention towards them.

Once eyes were on her, Hermione turned to Arya, who suddenly went pale as she realized how much power she actually had, with men older than her father looking at her with varying degrees of respect and indulgence.

She looked around the room, quickly catching the eye of those she trusted for guidance: Brienne and Hermione. Brienne gave Arya an encouraging nod, but Hermione mouthed, "*Thank them for coming.*"

Arya quickly swallowed and turned back to face the rest of the table, and stuttered through a nervous, "*Thank you for coming.*" She cleared her throat, and at her side, Hermione gave a smile. "I know that… that King Robb - that King Robb - is who you were all expecting to lead you. I know I'm not what you wanted."

She closed her eyes and firmed up, squaring her shoulders in her seat. When she opened them, the icy grey was a shard of steel. "But I promise that I am here to listen and learn from you. From every one of you - Northern and Riverlands Lords and Ladies alike. Together, we will move forward and show the people of Westeros, and our enemies, that Winter is Coming."

There was a raucous seal of approval as several began clapping or roaring their approval to Arya's words.

Feeling better, she eased back in her seat a bit, an almost-smug grin on her face. Hermione could
practically hear her thoughts: I can do this! But did not speak and watched and waited until the clapping and approval died down and Arya turned to Hermione to lead the rest of the meeting. Right, delegating.

"The contents of Robb's will are well-known to those of us who served as witness," began Hermione. She nodded at Umber, Karstark, and Bolton. "The only two missing from the witnesses are Lady Mormont and the Blackfish. Black Walder is dead and does not count."

There were some angry rumbles at the Frey name, but it quickly disappeared as Hermione summoned the will - a copy of the rolled parchment Maege had given her before leaving - to catch and read out loud.

"I, King Robb, First of His Name, do formally decree that my youngest sister, Princess Arya of Winterfell and the North, will rule in my stead, upon the conditions of my being indisposed and/or deceased while the Princess Arya is under the age of ten and six, with formal guidance and consensus approval by the following: Lord Roose Bolton of the Dreadfort, Lord Brynden Tully of Riverrun, Lady Maege Mormont of Bear Island, and Lady Hermione Granger.

"Furthermore, upon my being indisposed or dead, I appoint Lord Roose Bolton of the Dreadfort, Lord Rickard Karstark of Karhold, Lord Brynden Tully of Riverrun, Lord Jon Umber of Last Heath, Lady Maege Mormont of Bear Island and Lady Hermione Granger to run a small council to make decisions on my behalf until Princess Arya of Winterfell is of the age of ten and six."

There were some quiet mutterings, from around the large table, as Hermione rolled the scroll up. She placed it on the table in front of her and looked around the large room. "As you may guess, Lords Bolton, Karstark, as well as Lady Mormont and myself put forth a suggestion to move beyond a small council to include all members of King Robb's court." She took a moment to look many of the men in the eyes. "Each and every one of you has an important place in the Northern and Riverlands army, in maintaining this Kingdom and winning the war. You all bring something unique and different to the table, and your voice should be heard."

With a knowing nod to the young teen at her side, Hermione finished, "Princess Arya will have the final say on most decisions, but this is a collaborative exercise. So let's put it into practice and see what we can achieve - together."

There were more mutters this time - but of approval, even though it was cautious.

"Then what will our first decision be on, Lady Hermione?" a bold voice from one side of the room called out.

"Well, we did have a rather interesting addition to our army when the rear of the army was attacked by Gregor Clegane," said Hermione slowly. She turned to Arya. "Shall we discuss Sandor Clegane?"

An angry flush stole across Arya's face. "He's here?"

"Aye," said a man with a pale face and shaggy black hair. The sigil on his overcoat was unfamiliar to Hermione, but she thought he might be a Liddle or Norrey - a mountain clan man. "My men and I were at the rear of the camp that day when the Mountain attacked. We fought alongside Lady Hermione and the Hound."

Arya turned accusing eyes on her. "Why? Why would you do that? He killed Mycah! He's a beast!"

Hermione frowned. "I don't know who Mycah was-"
"He was my friend!" the teen interrupted, hotly. "And he rode him down and sliced him open and delivered him to the King and Queen!"

There were low murmurs at the table and Hermione's frown deepened as she tried to recall this incident - but there was no Queen around Clegane unless it happened before she was in Westeros. "I'm sorry, Princess Arya-" Hermione ensured she was using proper titles at a full meeting, even if the teen's face twisted at the title-"but I don't have any knowledge of this event."

So Arya slouched in her seat and recalled the event, back on her journey south along the King's road. Of course, some skill was required to read between the angry and clipped words, but it boiled down to Sandor Clegane killing an innocent boy on the angry orders of a bitter and twisted Queen who thought her eldest and spoilt son had been attacked by vicious small folk.

A throat cleared. Hermione glanced over and saw it was Bolton, but knowing that the man was soft-spoken and likely unable to be heard over the discontent of the others in the room, she flicked her finger at him and sent a nonverbal and wandless sonorous his way.

"I do think-" his face broke out in surprise - an odd sight - with his icy eyes widening as his voice, once reedy and thin and soft, practically boomed across the room, even if it were truly at regular speaking level. Everyone, no matter where they sat, turned in surprise to look at him. "I do think that Clegane is as much a product of the Lannisters as the situation is."

"How so?" asked a curious Riverlord. "His brother was happy with his Lannister masters."

"This one decidedly less so," said a disgruntled Edmure. "The man's been drinking his way through the stores at the Twins during the battle, and then afterward at Riverrun when he was sent back. A drunken man likes to tell tales." He made a face. "And he does so colourfully."

Someone snickered.

Hermione shifted in her seat. "He did save my life - his brother was about to kill me and I was without my wand at one point."

There was a startled silence, and Hermione, chin ducked, looked around the room. There were varying looks of shock and surprise; many hadn't known how close they had come to losing the witch during that battle. The fact that I am as human as them might be a bit more than a nasty surprise...

"One good deed does not erase a lifetime of poor ones," replied a disgruntled Marq Piper eventually. Edmure, and several other Riverlords of a similar age - clearly all friends - chimed in with loud "hear hear's."

"Nor should a lifetime of poor decisions overshadow someone's good deed," argued Karstark. "He tried; he succeeded. If we were to exile or execute everyone who made a mistake there would be very few people left."

"But he didn't make just one mistake," argued hotly Arya. "He's made several."

The room fell silent again as everyone contemplated the conundrum that was Sandor Clegane. Eventually, Hermione sighed. "I don't think we'll get anywhere on this topic tonight - but I would like to state that, as far as my magic is concerned, I owe him a life debt."

"A what?" someone called out.

"A life debt - he saved my life, and my magic will be compelled to return the favour," explained
Hermione, feeling a headache bloom. She reached up and rubbed at her forehead. "I won't have any choice but to intervene physically if we try to kill him. I could lose my magic if I do anything that would deliberately hurt him." She thought back to Harry's description of Pettigrew in Malfoy manor. The thought of her death by betraying a life debt made her sick. "Or… dead."

*Double shocks today regarding my morality, oh dear, thought Hermione, with a mental wince. Maybe we should move on to good news.*

Surprisingly, Arya spoke up. "If that's the case - Hermione, you are worth more than Clegane. As long as he swears fealty to the North, to me in Robb's place, then he can remain and fight for us."

"He is a good fighter," muttered Cerwyn.

"If he wishes to leave, we will not stop him," continued Arya with a nod. "I say that is… more than fair… considering my personal feelings."

"Shall we vote?" asked Hermione to the room at large. When no one spoke up in opposition, she rapped her right knuckles twice on the wood of the table in front of her. The magic imbued in the table recognized the premade signal, and the oval face on the tall back of her chair glowed a pale, but obvious, forest green. Loudly, to emphasize her actions, Hermione said, "I agree with Princess Arya."

Eyes alight, Karstark immediately did the same, rapping his knuckles twice on the tabletop, and his white sunburst on black sigil on the back of his chair glowed green as well.

Murmurs of amazement flowed through the room and Hermione watched in happiness as her magic worked; those agreeing with Arya's decision knocked on the table and their sigils glowed green until all had made their decision - only a few disgruntled Riverlords kept silent on the matter, when pressed by Arya for their vote, shaking their head. The overall numbers indicated favour toward Clegane, and the first vote of their Northern and Riverlands council passed.

Hermione felt the swell of triumph and caught Umber and Karstark's eyes as she swept them around the room. *This might actually work…!*

She regretted that thought a week later, watching a shouting match between two Lords. Arya sat at her side, in her Stark chair; eyes wide and head bouncing back and forth from one end of the room to the other, like a tennis match.

The young teen had been "shadowing" Hermione and the others from Robb's will for different matters since her arrival in Winterfell: both the Blackfish and Bolton taught Arya politics - her great-uncle had a shrewd mind for strategy but cared more for honour given his own war experiences with the War of the Ninepenny King. Bolton was calculated and able to suss out weaknesses in others, which gave Arya a different perspective on war - while Maege Mormont (still gone north to the Wall), left Lyra and Jorelle to teach Arya weaponry as per the heritage of the women of Bear Island.

Robb had previously assigned Brienne of Tarth to his mother for protection and company, especially after she had been locked up for her treasonous acts and deteriorating psyche, but upon the decision to attend the summit at the Twins, Robb assigned Brienne to his wilful younger sister. While at Riverrun, Edmure indulged his niece and gave her permission to learn to sword fight, which Brienne had begun and continued while at Winterfell. This was, of course, Arya's favourite part of the day.

With Hermione, she spent her time regurgitating her lessons late at night, after their meals, unknowingly passing them on to the witch, who herself was learning the history and politics of the
North and Westeros, its legends and histories, and reading between Arya's enthusiastic lines. On one hand, Hermione felt bad at manipulating Arya to share this knowledge with her, but Hermione thought it best to not say or go and ask someone - like Bolton, or Umber, or Karstark - to remove her knowledge deficit. It wasn't that she didn't trust them - but rather, she was worried about giving those men more power over her but giving her only certain information and withholding other.

The topic for that week was the coming winter (or already arrived, thought Hermione with a glance out a nearby window at the softly falling goose flakes, large and puffy as they began to coat the various slate shingles and rooftops of Winterfell), and by extension, their food stores from the Riverlands and beyond.

"There is no safe way to bring up further goods from the Riverlands without taking care of the advancing Ironborn raiders first!" shouted an auburn-whiskered man with mutton chops, the man's sigil of purple and gold, with four hawks' heads counter charged, signified him as a member of House Terrick. His lands literally butted against the Lannister lands of House Estren, north of the Whispering Woods and along the shores of Ironman's Bay. They were often in the way for Ironborn raiders.

"We control the King's Road now," argued a member of House Roote, standing and gesturing to the room at large. "As long as we maintain the pass-"

"It'll take too long," argued Donnal Locke, knowing his seat of Oldstones was closest to the King's Road after Greywater Marsh and the defunct Moat Cailin. "Travelling and taking carts led by oxen up that rickety dirt road? It would take months. And in the winter, it will be blocked."

"We need ships," sighed Wylis Manderly, sitting in for his father, Wyman, who did not leave the White Harbour for the meeting. "We, the Manderlys, have them, of course - but not enough to participate in trade as well as combat. Not to supply the whole of the North and Riverlands."

"We can only continue to monitor the West," supplied Jason Mallister, apologetically as he surveyed the room from his seat, Patrek standing behind him. "Just like Lord Manderly can do so from the East. But even so-"

"We're outnumbered and outgunned," sighed Hermione, ignoring the strange looks and Umber mouthing 'outgunned' to himself in confusion.

In front of her, her communication parchment dutifully recorded the conversation and different people speaking. Initially, the Maester of Winterfell, no longer Luwin but a man by the name of Cannion by way of Darry, had attempted to scribe. However, the fast-paced conversation was too much for the flustered man, and when Hermione suggested the parchment instead to ease his fingers and wrists, the man had graciously bowed out. However, he remained in the room during the discussion, in an empty chair that remained unchanged, nodding along or making his own notes on his parchment, which showed up on everyone else's as one collaborative piece.

"Can we not place another shield ward like what Lady Hermione did for the Riverlands?" asked Lyman Darry, the youngest of the Lords at the table, with a tentative voice.

Hermione shook her head. "It takes a lot of time, and quite honestly, it's draining to do. And I don't think many of you would be interested in supplying blood again. Asking the first time was difficult enough."

Even now at the mention, many of the men in the room looked sick at the idea of blood magic, given its connotations in the realm.
"Well, the East isn't attacked as much," explained Wylis slowly, "But there is the risk of pirates and quite honestly, our regular trading partners are the Vale, Crownlands, and the Reach - and none of them are going to continue to trade with us."

A glum mood settled over the room.

Hermione leaned back in her seat and tilted her head up to look at the ceiling. "What we need is a navy to patrol the waters, and then we can start bringing in merchant ships without worry of attack."

There was a muffled snort, but it was more self-depreciative than rude.

"My Lady Hermione," began a youngish woman with long sandy blonde hair and eyes that resembled sea foam, "The North hasn't had a navy since Brandon the Burner."

"Lady Flint," said Hermione slowly, glancing at the blue waves and blue eyes on yellow background of the young squire that stood near the woman to figure out she was Lyessa Flint of Widow's Watch, "I completely understand that the North hasn't had a navy for hundreds of years. But… needs must."

Lyessa looked uncomfortable, glancing at her liege lord, Wylis, for support. "We don't… we don't really know much or build much, my lady."

Hermione glanced at Mallister, who shrugged. "Despite what many would think, Lady Hermione, Seaguard has a small fleet of six longships and two war galleys. We are on the coast, but mainly for trade. Not defense. Lannisport was always the first point of contact for large-scale raids."

Hermione frowned, glancing down at her parchment as she thought. No other words were recorded on the paper, but there were some strange scribbles in the margin. Her frown deepened. *Maybe I should redo the runes and charms on this later if it's not even copying down things properly.*

At her side, Arya leaned forward a bit and muttered, "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that we need to expand and build trade," replied Hermione, looking up, just as the others broke into small conversations with those nearby. She kept her voice low. "We need to find something valuable to trade with others if the rest of Westeros is closed to us. I mean, there are some internal options for food growth…"

"Oh? How so, my lady?" boomed Wylis, who had been listening in.

Hermione sighed. Sometimes her magic was too good and carried her voice to those who were interested in hearing.

"Greenhouses," began Hermione, listing off ideas with her fingers as she spoke. "Hydroponics. Both would produce year-round crops. A navy built up along the west, spanning Seaguard to the Stony Shore, Sea Dragon Point, and Bear Island. Smaller ports of trade at Widow's Walk and maybe a new settlement on the Last River between Bolton and Karstark lands."

By now, most were looking at her. Hermione, realizing this, stood and leaned over the table. With a wave of her wand, it turned into a large-scale map of Westeros and the surrounding area - an idea she had taken from Arya, who complained one night about Dragonstone's wooden war table after a lesson with Brynden Tully.

With each named place for a potential port, the wood changed colour, reshaping through her transfiguration spell to form a port with extended docks into the nearby water.

"We would need a significant amount of timber," said Mallister slowly, also standing and he brought
his hand to his chin to rub it.

Wylis also stood, looking over the map. "This also gives a significant advantage to the west."

He eyed Hermione, and she sighed, realizing that she needed to sweeten the deal for the rich trade port. "What about a naval academy? In my world, people go to specific schools to learn trades and abilities. A naval academy at the White Harbour for training would then also be the headquarters of any naval operations." She looked around the room. "As for the timber, that's easy enough to distribute and transport by shrinking them down and PortKeying them to these locations. I would just need to visit them first to visualize them for the spell."

The glum mood began to shift.

"And what about these 'greenhouses' and 'hydroponics'?” asked someone else, a Knott from the Northern mountain clans. "Are these similar to glass houses?"

Arya took over. "I think they are the same thing, right, Hermione?"

She nodded. "Yes - but hydroponics is the growth of vegetation in water. It's a bit more scientific than that - it requires a lot of minerals and the right levels of oxygen and nitrogen - but it's something we can work towards later." She glanced at the map and used her wand to trace a bright white line from the Three Sisters in the Bite across to Moat Cailin, and then to the Fever river and out to the Saltspear and out to Blazewater Bay. "And maybe eventually a canal?"

A bewildered Cley Cerwyn sputtered, "And how long would that take?"

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "At nearly 400 miles from one end of this to the other? At least a decade, with my magic. Even if would be beneficial for us, it's definitely not something feasible right now."

There were groans at the pronouncement.

"Let's vote on what we can do now," proposed the Greatjon, slamming a hand down on the table, making the noise echo. "The first being to build a navy."

Immediately, those at the table scrambled to make their decisions, some rapping on the table to turn their sigils green. A few others took moments longer, but eventually, all occupied chairs were green.

Umber nodded in satisfaction.

"To begin construction in the west, at the locations of the Stony Shore, Sea Dragon Point, and Bear Island?" asked Karstark, his voice loud and clear.

Again, several raps knocked on the table, and almost everyone agreed to the proposal.

Bolton nodded in satisfaction, adding, "To begin construction in the east, at Widow's Walk, and on the Last River?"

There was a bit more waffling here.

"If it's on your land, the two of you will benefit from it the most," argued Blackwood with a 'humph' of unhappiness as he leaned back and crossed his arms. "I'm seeing more benefits for the North than for us Riverlords!"

Bolton and Karstark's eyes met and a silent communication occurred, with Karstark nodding, once.
Bolton turned back to face Blackwood. "Lord Karstark and I would cover all costs of the venture out of our own coffers."

Blackwood still looked unhappy, as did many other Riverlords, so Hermione suggested, "What about a wage system?"

Heads swiveled to face her.

"My Lady?" asked a cautious Bracken - although his tone was more aligned to a thoughtful 'oh? Do go on' than cautionary 'what are you doing now?'

"If there will be trade ports at Widow's Walk and a new one on Last River, why not send Riverlands men there first from the naval academy once training is complete?" began Hermione. "Implement a wage system there - men who work or are stationed at these ports receive an allowance or set wage per month - erm, moon, sorry - that they can pocket. From there, their liege lords can ask for a…" Hermione bit her lip, squirming at the idea, but pushed forward, "A tax where a portion of that money returns to them."

The idea of a tax seemed to be a bit too receptive (and Hermione certainly didn't want the poor to become even poorer), so Hermione rushed to add: "Of course, you could also just provide start-up capital to Lords Bolton and Karstark, as well, and ask for a shareholder position in these ports, meaning that a portion of their gross would also go to you."

This, too, seemed to appeal to the Riverlands Lords, many of whom were eyeing a now-flustered Karstark and cool Bolton, although the tiny cut-eye the softly-spoken man sent Hermione conveyed his displeasure. She shrugged unrepentantly.

"All in favour of Widow's Walk and Last River?" called Arya, returning their attention to the last proposal.

"As long as there is some form of monetary agreement," added Blackwood with a resolute nod.

The room voted, and the chairs were green, passing the motion and amendment. Hermione spied the pleased smile behind Blackwood's black beard and sighed.

Always the opportunist, she thought, shaking her head a bit.

From there, the conversation turned to how much wood would be needed; who could spare men or small folk to begin chopping down trees and the stripping of the wood. When would Hermione find the time to transport and/or visit these proposed ports? Where would they find people with winter coming or already here?

Finer points were conversed and covered, and slowly, as the daylight bled into night, the Lords and Ladies at the table came to several agreements and provided several options to go forward to supply the North and Riverlands with the materials necessary for these ventures, as well as future ventures.

Arya called an end to the session, no doubt eager to attend her evening meal, as the fourteen-year-old scrambled out of the room quickly, Brienne on her heels.

Hermione eased off her seat in response to the end of the session, picking up her parchment. She sighed, looking at the scribbles of illegible words and shapes that took up the bottom, just under the results of their votes. She rolled it up, vowing to look into that later, and pocketed it into her ever-present beaded bag at her side.

"My Lady," a voice said, and Hermione turned to see Patrek Mallister and Eddard Karstark had left
where they stood behind their fathers to approach her. Just hovering behind them were Lucas Blackwood, Donnal Locke, Wendyl Manderly, and the Smalljon, each focused squarely on her.

Hermione narrowed her eyes suspiciously on the large cluster of Robb's guard. Eddard and Patrek were the most well-known to her, having stuck to her side like a burr since the Twins, with Lucas and Wendyl spending more time with Daryn Hornwood, who was in the anger stage of the loss of his arm. "Yes…?"

Patrek looked nervously around at the other men and the quickly emptying war room as the older Lords went to their meals in their private rooms or the Hall - but a few, predominantly their fathers, for those who had them there, remained. He then took a deep breath and sank to one knee in front of her.

Hermione froze.

Eddard immediately copied Patrek, with Lucas shortly after him. Wendyl and the Smalljon, both being larger men, sunk quickly to their knee but shifted to get comfortable. Donnal Locke took the longest, giving her a measuring glance, but then was looking up at her from below.

"If Hornwood were here, he would do the same, my Lady," began Patrek, clearly the spokesperson of the group. "But as he is not, I hope you take my words as sincere."

"Patrek, what are you doing?" asked a flustered and incredibly nervous Hermione. She glanced at his father, who gave her an amused nod. Blackwood's face shone with pride and Hermione's heart sank to somewhere around her ankles. "Edd - get up. For Merlin's sake-"

"We need to guard someone, my lady," explained Patrek, peering up at her, his brown hair pushed off his forehead. "We were part of His Grace's guard, and Princess Arya already has Lady Brienne as her sworn shield."

"I'm sure one or two of you could join her-" interrupted Hermione, her voice going shrill at the end in panic.

"Torrhen gave his life to protect you, as His Grace asked," blithely continued Patrek, speaking over Hermione with a glint in his eyes that reminded Hermione all too much of a combination of stubborn Harry and devilishly amused Sirius.

A frown pulled on Edd's face.

"We would do the same."

Six pairs of eyes peered up at her from faces near her age (Lucas, two years older) to Donnal, in his thirties. All were looking at her expectantly, but solemnly.

"What about your fathers - your Houses -" she sputtered out.

"Pardon, Lady Hermione," said the Smalljon with a grin, "But our families are strong warriors, capable without us."

Hermione's shock quickly nosedived to indignation. "Excuse me? Are you saying that I'm not capable?"

The Smalljon froze and his eyes widened in panic. "Ummm..."

"You are far more than capable," smoothly interjected Patrek, "But you are not invincible, Lady
Hermione. For those times when you are not - let us be there."

Weakly, Hermione looked at them and said, "But - Sansa?"

"When Princess Sansa returns, then we will reassess and assign someone to her," explained Patrek easily.

Hermione frowned. "I can't stop you, can I?"

He shook his head.

Her frown deepened and she cut her amber eyes across them all, petulantly saying, "Fine. You can all guard me - not like it's necessary."

At her words, relief spread across Patrek's face, and Hermione realized that they were expecting more of a fight from her regarding the topic. The men got to their feet, most of them towering over her.

Annoyed, she added with some spite, "Let's start now, shall we? I'm going to see Theon Greyjoy."

Donnal nodded - but Hermione wasn't about to make it easy for them in Winterfell - and turned on her heel, twisting the air around her sharply so that a very loud, very unhappy crack cut through the war room. She Apparated to a different tower on the opposite end of the castle, landing down the hall from the room where Theon had been placed.

There were two guards at his door, and two guards on either end of the hallway. Those closest to where she appeared jumped, falling into a battle stance. Upon seeing her, both scrambled to stand straight, and one hastily said, "Our pardon, milady."

Hermione waved it off, striding down the stone until she reached the other two guards, who nodded respectfully at her, and then opened the door. Inside, Hermione saw that the room was outfitted similarly to that of Jaime Lannister's: everything but the essentials were removed, including sheets.

Theon himself had an ankle chain cuffing him to the wooden bed. The bed itself wasn't too sturdy, and Hermione could probably have yanked herself free of the cuff without her magic, but Theon was so frail and unstable that the thought likely hadn't occurred to him at all.

The young man was curled on the bed, back facing the fire. He was dressed nicely, although not in the finery of a Greyjoy heir. However, it was warm wool, and the temperature was pleasant. Hermione eased further in, her steps soft but it was like a gun went off as Theon jerked his head towards her and shuffled backwards until he was pressed against the wall the bed was pushed up against.

In the warm light of the room, Hermione could see everything that Ramsay Snow had done to him. Her eyes roved down, cataloguing the missing fingers, the shiny white and pink of new skin and scars along his arms from sleeves pushed up; his hair was stringy and missing in clumps - from where he must have pulled it out in panic or fear - and his cheek was misshapen, like the bone had been broken at some point and was healing poorly. Knobby knees were visible beneath his loose trousers, and his bare feet were badly scarred with crisscrossing white lines, the toes purple and the nails slowly growing back.

"No, no, no," he mumbled under his breath, and brought his arms up to cross in front of his face.

The door behind her opened once more, and Maester Cannion breathlessly entered. "Lady Hermione, I must ask you-"
"Theon," she said, interrupting the man. "Look at me."

The man on the bed kept whimpering, ignoring her.

She frowned, turning to Cannion. "How bad was the torture?"

The man, reedy with wide, round eyes that gave him a perpetual shocked look - but nowhere near as comforting as Luna's wide-eyed wonder - sputtered, "My Lady - really - you shouldn't -"

"How bad, Cannion?"

He sighed, playing nervously with his Maester's links. "Not as bad as I heard the Boltons could be."

At the name, Theon twitched.

"Mentally?" asked Hermione, looking down at the man who betrayed Robb and ran his brothers out of Winterfell. *Who did you kill in their place? Why? Did you do that to save Bran and Rickon? Why would you do that if you hate the Starks?*

Cannion shrugged. "Sometimes he returns. Other times, he is Reek."

Theon lowered his arms and looked at them with wide eyes. "Reek! I am Reek! Please!"

Hermione pursed her lips. Using Legilimency on him would probably trample through much of the confusion regarding his identity, but Hermione neither knew how to perform the spell nor did she want to end up caught in someone with a dissociative personality.

Instead, she lowered herself carefully to the floor at the side of the bed, holding Theon's eyes as she knelt. At a lower point than him, he seemed to unwind slowly.

She heard a commotion and someone - like Eddard, she was getting used to his mouth - swear colourfully. She threw back a hand, stopping her new guards from entering, and kept Theon's attention on her as she smiled gently at him.

"Hi Theon," she said, changing her tone and attitude from when she first entered.

His body began to uncurl.

"Do you remember who you are, Theon?" she asked, supplying him with information. "You're Theon Greyjoy. Remember?"

"Theon?" he muttered back, eyes unfocused. "Not Reek?"

"No, just Theon Greyjoy."

The man shook his head, rocking back and forth and gripping his hair. "No - no - Theon failed. Failed!"

Hermione grimaced. *Was this how working with Dobby at his maddest was like? If so, I owe Harry and Ron a lot of apologies for S.P.E.W.*

Hesitantly, she reached forward and gently pried Theon's hands away from his hair, shushing him like a mother would a child. The man calmed down, breathing quickly.

"You didn't fail Theon," said Hermione, although she wasn't sure what he failed at - Bran and Rickon maybe? "You're here."
He moaned, shaking his head. "No, no, failed. Failed a capturing Winterfell. Failed father, and failed Asha."

Well, she thought. That solved one thing.

His chest heaved up and down and Theon struggled to get air in his lungs, but it seemed that he wanted to speak this mind, and the words exploded out of him in gasps and bursts: "I couldn't do it - couldn't kill them - had to - had to - had to do something - the Miller's children - they were like a family to me - I'm sorry - I'm so sorry - I had to - honour as a Stark - but such a greenlander - bad Theon! Bad! - I didn't want to - I'm sorry - it all went wrong - I had to - I chose wrong - I chose wrong!"

Hermione blinked and watched as he collapsed into sobs, his face covered by his hands. It was the only noise in the room, and Hermione realized, with a mental sigh, that if she thought Sandor Clegane was going to be difficult, she clearly underestimated Theon Greyjoy and his slew of problems.

Pushing off with her hands, Hermione rose from her crouch beside the bed and turned. Eddard was in the doorway, with Donnal Locke beside him. Both were frowning heavily at Theon.

"What's all that, then?" muttered Edd darkly as Hermione approached.

Hermione glanced over her shoulder at Theon, while Maester Cannon attempted to get him to drink some milk of poppy to send him to sleep. "That? I would say that's a broken man regretting his life's decisions."

"Will his sister and father send men for him?" asked Locke, eyes shifting from Theon to Hermione.

She paused and then shrugged. "I don't think so." Unbidden, a lance of sympathy shot through her. "I don't think anyone is going to come for him."

Hermione stepped forward and with a gentle hand, pushed on Edd's chest to shove him towards the door - she was a bit more hands-on with the Karstark brothers than others, as she often treated Torrhen as such. "Come on. I think it's time we leave - there's nothing else to see here."

Standing around the crowded dining table in Grimmauld Place, Robb held his breath as he wrote down Hermione - can you read this? I'm at Grimmauld Place with Harry! and watched as the ink dried, soaking into the communication parchment he had with him when he travelled to her world.

Across from him, Luna's pale eyes shifted from the parchment to him, and when they met, she gave him a small smile.

"It'll work, mate," said Harry quietly at his side, clapping a hand on his shoulder in support. "Bill's a genius with ancient runes, and he was able to deconstruct and figure out what spells Hermione loaded on this thing."

"And since it's the original one that she gave you," the man in question said, with a toothy grin as he looked up from his relaxed lounge against the edge of the table, "It'll appear on all the parchments."

Robb nodded, looking back down. He sharply inhaled, along with several others, giddy, as ink began to spread out at the top of the parchment.

However, his elation shifted quickly to disappointment as the written lines appearing in short blocks of text were jumbled, a mess of odd shapes and squiggles that didn't appear like anything Robb could
"Is this… is this a different language?" he asked, turning in confusion to Bill.

The redhead frowned and leaned over the table. "I-"

The only person seated at the table was Professor Flitwick, and even the small man had a hard time of it as he squinted his eyes and then shook his head. "That's no language I've ever seen. Is it the language of your people, King Robb?"

Robb shook his head. "I don't recognize this either."

Ron snorted, rolling his eyes. "Hermione knows *loads* of languages. This could be any one of them."

Neville looked askance at his fellow Gryffindor alum. "What? You think she's writing in code?"

"She'd never do that," replied George confidently, causing a red flush to race up Ron's ears. "If she were - y'know - more of a troublemaker, more interested in pranks like me an' Fred were, or the Marauders, sure… but…"

With a sigh of disappointment, Harry eased back and took a step away from the table. "I guess we can strike that idea off the list."

Robb, too, leaned back and rubbed at his face. *Perhaps I was too hopeful for our first venture.*

"And back to the drawing board," chimed in Flitwick, slightly more cheerful than the group felt. "This was only the first of several ideas, You Grace - do cheer up! It's not the end of the world. Miss Lovegood, Misters Billus-"

"Bill," muttered Bill, lowly under his breath, a slightly wolfish growl vibrating from his throat.

"-and George Weasley, and Miss Delacour will move onto the next," finished the Charm professor evenly. "This was just one idea of linking an item from your world with ours based on the spells attached to it."

"It's only been two weeks," said Harry quietly, at Robb's side. "Honestly, I would've been surprised if we found a way that quickly, given that Hermione's been missing for over a year."

"I don't *have* a year," replied Robb, just as quietly, the protest in his voice making his throat tighten. He swallowed thickly.

Harry nudged Robb, causing the man to look at him directly in his emerald eyes. "We'll find a way. I promise."

Robb searched his eyes but saw nothing but calm conviction and truth. Finally, he sighed, his shoulders slumping a bit. "Okay." He drew in a deep breath and turned to face the room. "What's next?"

When Olyvar woke, he was lying facedown on hard, uncomfortable wooden planks. A splinter was lodged in his cheek and he nearly cried pulling it out as he sat up, blinking in the bright sunlight. Immediately, his stomach rolled in time with the rocking of the ground, and he somehow managed to make it to the railing, leaning over it just as his stomach emptied its contents into the clear blue waters below.

A muffled laugh made Olyvar turn, looking over his shoulder. A weathered man grinned at him.
"First time on a boat, lad?" the man asked cheerfully - far too cheerfully for Olyvar. He groaned and
leaned back over the side, spewing spittle and water.

Eventually, he heaved away from the rail but remained clutching tightly at it. He knew he was
shaking, and the heat from the sun bore down on him, plastering his brown hair to his forehead.

"Where am I?" he moaned. "Who're you?"

The weathered man grinned. "You're on the Maiden's Vault, lad. Week two of ten. We left Seaguard
and are travelling to Planky Town in Dorne. You've been the best guest we've had for some time -
completely out of it until now. As for who am I? I am Captain Tollett."

Swallowing the bitter taste of bile, Olyvar closed his eyes. Planky town? He thought, frowning. How
in the Seven did I end up here?

Pain burst across his brain, and a female voice - clear as a bell - spoke as his memories coalesced and
came together.

"Execution? I'm not going to kill you, Olyvar... you're going to do a job for me."

Lady Hermione! Olyvar's eyes shot open, and he glanced around the vessel, its large white sail
billowed in a strong northerly wind as they cut across the gentle waves. There was no shore - over a
week away from Seaguard and the Riverlands, Olyvar could only assume they were reaching the
ends of the Westerlands and entering the long coast and waters of the Reach.

"I ah-" Olyvar looked around. "Did I-"

Tollett was looking at him strangely.

"You see that box? You're going to go deliver it to the Martells in Dorne."

"Did I arrive with something?" Olyvar asked. He tried to stand on his legs, but they were shaky and
he felt as awkward as a newborn colt attempting to stand for the first time.


With a firm nod in thanks, Olyvar swayed and stumbled across the crowded ship, flushing under the
knowing looks and muffled snickers of the crew and sailors at his gangly walk, until he was below.
He found the crew's quarters, a long stretch of a room with hammocks for beds hanging in groups of
three. His box was nearest to the door.

"You must know, though, that once you leave the North and Riverlands, you're going to blocked
from returning."

Olyvar shut his eyes at the pain of the Lady's voice. It rang with the same tinge of sympathy as she
said it then, and Olyvar felt it deep. At least Ros is safe. She promised. She promised! I just can't ever
see my family again...

He stumbled into the rough hemp-hammock, and curled up there, trying to ease his stomach and
nausea that wasn't just from being seasick. It took a long time for him to fall asleep, but sleep he did.
And when he woke, Lady Hermione's voice echoed: "You just can't come back. Only forward."

And on the tail of that, a whispered addition, "So go forward, Olyvar. Be brave."

He stumbled from his bed, less shaky than the day before, and marched to Tollett, who
stood looking forward out to the horizon with his hands clasped behind his back.

The man turned, a question on his lips, but Olyvar beat him to it, asking, determinedly, "What can I do?"

Several weeks later, Tollett and the Maiden's Vault drew into Planky Town just as a red sun sank off to the west of the glittering waters of the Summer Sea. Olyvar's face had finally turned brown instead of bright red, the skin having peeled off during the journey. His hands, once calloused from his sword, were calloused now from rope burn, and different muscles formed.

"How long do you think you will be?" asked Tollett as he drew alongside the teen, both staring out at the busy port town, even at dusk.

"I'm not sure," replied Olyvar.

Tollett hummed. "Well, we'll be restocking before heading off to Volantis. That's at least a three-month long journey, and we'll need the provisions for it. It'll take a good two weeks or so before we're ready to head off."

"Captain…?"

The older man smiled down at Olyvar and grinned. "There's a spot here for you, Olyvar, if you're back in time."

Olyvar's eyes grew wide. "Captain!" He nodded enthusiastically. "I do! I will be!"

"Good," chortled Tollett. "When you're on land, go see ol' Gath, two streets over and down past the Viper's Watering Hole. He'll treat you well if you say you're one of mine, alright? He'll get you a good horse and guide to Sunspear."

Barely an hour later, Olyvar, clutching the large square box he was given, awkwardly holding onto it as he didn't have a pouch to place it in as he bounced along with his horse's canter. The cool desert air was a relief to the warmth of Dorne - something he, a Frey from the northernmost point in the Riverlands - as he had never experienced such heat even during their warmest days of summer.

His guide, a miserable dark-haired man who was selling turnips of some kind, was often grumbling about foreign idiots (Olyvar assumed he meant him), but was kind enough to ensure Olyvar didn't stumble into a nearby snake pit on his first full night, nor die of dehydration a week later. Still grumbling that he would wait for Olyvar to finish his business, he nudged Olyvar in the direction of Sunspear.

The Old Palace was a large compound of domes and towers that was separate from the town of Sunspear by a thick, reddish-brown clay-like bridge. Its walls were also the same clay-like colour, dusty and dry, except for the dome, which glittered sunlight off its glass and gold form.

Guards stood positioned along the bridge, carefully eyeing him as he, along with other petitioners, inched forward. Eventually, Olyvar passed under the Old Palace gate and found himself shuffled off to one side into smaller, more manageable groups. His was not near the front of the procession led inside after checked over by guards, but by no means towards the back, either.

Eventually, a guard in Martell colours of burnt orange strode towards him and the four others in his group, eyeing them all carefully.

"You there," he said, pointing at Olyvar, "Who are you and what's in the box?"
"I am Olyvar Frey," he began, and he saw the guard's mouth twist in displeasure.

*News of what occurred at the Twins must have already reached Dorne,* thought Olyvar, but then he frowned. *What happened at the Twins?* All he knew, it was something bad because his stomach turned over as bad as his first days at sea.

"And in the box?"

Olyvar blinked, panic overtaking him. "I - I don't know - it was given to me."

The guard's eyes narrowed. "*By whom?*

"By Lady Hermione," he blurted and then sighed in relief. He could at least speak *someone's* name!

"Lady Hermione?" the guard repeated, his voice low. Something dawned on him because he pulled Olyvar from the group and ushered him inside alone. Blessedly out of the sun and outer courtyard, Olyvar breathed the cooler air as his steps slipped along pale white marble floors.

The further the guard led Olyvar through the Palace, the more guards there were until he was sweating with nerves. At a closed set of doors, a tall, dark-skinned and broad-shouldered man with a glaive stopped the guard escorting Olyvar.

"Stop. Who is this?" the man's voice was low and rumbled across the marble tiles.

"Olyvar Frey," explained the guard. "He comes from the North. Bearing a box from the Lady Hermione."

The two men shared a significant look, but the glaive-carrying man scowled and asked, "Did you look in the box? What if there is a spell, or curse, attached to it?"

The guard paled and shook his head.

Grumbling, the other man jerked his head at the box and Olyvar dutifully held it out to his escort, who swallowed thickly and then quickly unlatched it, swinging the lid open in a rushed manner. He looked down into the box and froze.

"Well?" asked the impatient man.

"Captain Hotah - it's - it's-" the other guard sputtered, turning back from the contents of the box to stare in mystified surprise. "You will want to see this!"

Narrowing his eyes, Hotah stepped forward and peered into the box. His own eyes grew wide, and he glanced between Olyvar and the box several times before slamming his glaive on the marble and turning sharply on his heel, opening the doors.

Inside was the throne room, underneath the dome Olyvar had been admiring earlier. It was round, with several thick windows and many colored glass patterns that created elusive colours and shapes on the white marble. There were two seats on a dais, near twins to one another. The seat inlaid with the Martell spear on its back was occupied by a man, thin and slightly curled, and dressed in a light orange tunic. His hair was curly and salt-and-pepper in colour, and his beard, more white than black, was neatly trimmed close to his cheeks. His skin was a deep tan, olive almost, and his eyes dark.

"Aero? Who is this?" he asked, and his voice was strong, eyes curious.

"Forgive me, my Prince," Aero Hotah said, stepping forward and bowing. "This is Olyvar Frey. He
comes with a gift from the Lady Hermione."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Lady Hermione? The witch in the North?"

The dark eyes cut to Olyvar, and a hand beckoned him forward. Olyvar swallowed and did so, in careful, slow steps. As he neared, he realized that there was another man hidden behind the occupied chair, his tunic long and more yellow than orange. Their hair and eyes were similar, but whereas the man in the chair had a longer face, the man behind was a bit squarer.

"Do you know who I am, Olyvar Frey?" asked the man in the chair as he came to a stop near the bottom of the dais.

"You're - You're Prince Doran Martell," said Olyvar, licking his suddenly dry lips.

"Yes," the Prince of Dorne answered. "What is it that the witch sent me? And for what purpose?"

Although it had taken some time for Olyvar's memories to return, other parts remained elusive. Now, at Doran's question, words suddenly swam into focus and he realized whatever spell he was under, it was not maliciously intended but as a form of protection.

"T-The Lady Hermione sends this gift to House Martell," began Olyvar, extending his shaking arms with the box out to the Prince. "To show that justice has been delivered."

From behind the chair, the tall man stepped forward, glancing down at Doran, a deep frown on his face. Doran glanced back at the box, and the other man stepped down from the dais, almost jauntily, until he reached Olyvar.

"If this is some trick or if it will cast a spell on me," the man began haughtily, "Nothing will stop my brother and daughters from avenging me against this witch of yours, boy."

Olyvar shook his head. "Not a trick, my Prince."

The man raised a single eyebrow and then peered into the box. He, like the guard outside the room, froze.

"Oberyn?" called Doran, his voice lightly concerned.

Eyes flashing, Oberyn Martell grabbed the box and yanked it - and Olyvar - forward until their noses were nearly touching. "Who gave you this? How?! Tell me!"

"Oberyn!" called Doran sharply, and then Aero Hotah was there, separating the two, Olyvar stumbled back, but free of the box, which Oberyn was clutching tightly, protectively, to his chest. "What's gotten into you?"

"Look! Look! The Frey bastard has been given his head!" snapped Oberyn, twirling around to face his brother, his yellowed tunic flaring dramatically behind him. "It's him! The Mountain!"

Then, he hissed: "The man who killed Elia!"

Doran's dark eyes shifted from his brother to Olyvar. "Who gave you this?"

"Lady Hermione, my Prince," the teen said, taking a deep breath and trying to avoid shaking. "She... she defeated Gregor Clegane in battle..." here, Olyvar frowned. He couldn't remember how she did, only that it had happened. "And she wanted to send his head to House Martell to let them know that justice was given for Princess Elia."
There was silence. Then, Doran's eyes narrowed. "And what does the witch want?"

Olyvar blinked. "Nothing, my Prince…?"

"Everyone wants something," muttered Oberyn, stepping back towards the chairs on the dais, still protectively clutching the box.

"No, my Prince," said Olyvar, beginning to feel comfortable. "She just… she just wants to do good. To help the North. She cares."

There was a disbelieving glance between the two brothers, a silent communication that had Doran sighing. "I see. Well, young Olyvar Frey. You may stay the night as our guest, and then tomorrow be on your way. Do you have somewhere to go?"

Olyvar nodded.

"Good," finished Prince Doran, turning to the first guard who escorted him in. "Daerys, show the boy to a room. Feed him, wash his clothes."

The guard nodded, bowed, and gestured for Olyvar to come. The young Frey bowed as well, muttering, "Thanks my Princes," and such, only turning his back on them just before he exited the throne room. His last look was of the two brothers lowly muttering to themselves, over the box.

*My last duty for the North is complete,* the teen thought, sighing. There was a boat, and a new adventure and future, waiting for him. And he was eager to begin it. After all, only forward; never back.

Oberyn's eyes were glittering in the light filtering through the stained glass. "At last, Doran! At last! The Mountain is dead and it wasn't by my hand!"

Doran shot his brother a look. "No, not by yours. And perhaps thank the Seven given your temper!"

Oberyn scowled.

"We should concern ourselves as to why the witch sent this to us," said Doran instead, drawing Oberyn's attention from the box.

"Does she seek an alliance?" the younger asked.

Doran shrugged, shifting in his chair. "There was no mention of it. I find it strange that she would just… give such a gift, though."

Oberyn hummed in agreement. "Perhaps..."

"Perhaps?"

"Perhaps my daughters could go on a trip," continued the man lightly, glancing deceptively away. His tone was light, kind. "They have been at the Water Gardens for some time now, and they itch to go exploring once more."

"And where do you girls plan on visiting?" asked Doran, knowingly.

Oberyn grinned. "Why, we've never been to the North! All that I've travelled, and seen, and that is one place I have yet to visit. I should rectify that, don't you think, brother?"
"There's a royal marriage to take place," reminded Doran, turning away to face forward, deep in thought. "The Martells should go and represent the house. Remind the Lannisters we, too, pay our debts."

"One debt is already paid," sighed Oberyn.

"Only one," replied Doran quietly. "Not all." He nodded. "Yes, I think a trip should be taken. King's Landing first, though. Prince Joffrey's marriage to Margaery Tyrell is soon, and we should be there."

Oberyn paused, nearly quivering. "And then?"

"Once that… happy event is done," finished Doran, "Do continue your adventures, brother. I look forward to what you discover."

The grin his brother gave him was predatory.

____________________________________________________________________________

TBC...
In case anyone wants music, the scene with Hermione walking in the hallway (you’ll know when you get to it), is Adam Jones – You Can Run; recognizable dialogue from 4x06, “the Laws of Gods and Men.”
There is some minor, squint-and-you’ll-miss-it SanSan in this chapter, but nothing set in stone.
All the books that Robb looks at in Waterstones are actual books listed on their website in the military history section. I took a scroll through and picked those with interesting covers and titles that Robb might get curious about.

Winter Witch
II - VII

When it came down to it, thought Sansa, Tyrion wasn't a bad husband. He was just… there. And he certainly never forced himself on her - not after that first rather disappointing night on his end when she recoiled in shock - not so much horror or disgust, but the moment to tell him that was long passed - and now they settled into pleasant companionship.

But she didn't trust him. He was a Lannister, after all.

So Sansa waited until Tyrion left their shared quarters, taking Bronn with him. She dismissed Shae, asking for the evening to herself to unwind after another trying day at court with Joffrey screaming about the florists getting a flower wrong, and his cruel green eyes searching for a suitable target to vent at. Luckily, they skipped over her, but she shuddered at the remembrance of what happened to the poor fool, Ser Dontos.

With four days to go, Sansa couldn't wait for the wedding to be over. The drama was the downside; the upside was the incredible amount of information people let slip around her, the silly little orphaned traitor's daughter.

The other day, she overheard two Sers talking about the Ironborn raids, changing from attacking the North, which had suddenly become incredibly well-defended, to focusing their attention on Lannisport. Tywin was apparently spitting mad, as his brother, Ser Kevan, wasn't do as good as he had hoped, keeping the Ironborn away.

Why, even the servants in the castle were ignoring her, now - two gossiping maids had mentioned the words "the Queen" and "Kettleblack" in the same sentence with some rather excitable giggles, and from there, Sansa had a good idea of what was going on.

Flopping down on the bed like the teen she was, Sansa laughed a little to herself and felt a grin stretch across her lips. Who knew spying could be so much fun? I suddenly understand why Lord Varys does what he does.

The very idea - the absolute power in knowing something, about someone, or something happening
elsewhere - while others were completely clueless gave Sansa a thrill of pleasure. Oh, all those Lords, Ladies, and people of the court and castle just saw Sansa Stark, the traitor's daughter and silly, silly little girl - but with what she was learning? What she was discovering - not only about others, but also about herself?

She was rather breathless.

Fishing her communication mirror out from underneath her pillow, Sansa lounged and said, clearly, "Arya Stark."

It took a few moments before Sansa's reflection turned into murkiness, and then her sister's long, pale face appeared. Sansa blinked in surprise; Arya looked tired, her grey eyes slightly dull and her hair, no longer a short, boyish chop, was growing past her chin.

"Arya," began Sansa, "You look… well."

Her sister snorted. "Liar."

"I didn't want to say anything," said Sansa, with a small grin on her lips. "What's been happening at Winterfell?"

Arya sighed. "Lessons, lessons, and more lessons. The only fun I have is when Lady Brienne is teaching me swordplay."

Sansa's mouth dropped open. "Swordplay? Arya!"

"Oh, don't you start, too!" groaned Arya. "Robb didn't mind! And Hermione is always interested. Besides, Lyra and Jorelle Mormont are here, and they have blades."

"Yes, but they're Mormonts," said Sansa, like that explained everything. She rolled her eyes and looked up at the stone ceiling of her quarters.

Arya huffed something and they fell silent. Then: "Did you call for a reason other than complain how I'm not being all 'ladylike'?"

The face she made and the scorn in her voice at the last word made Sansa sigh. "I just wanted to call and check in. Joffrey's wedding is in four days."

Surprise coloured Arya's grey eyes. "That's… soon. I'll pass that on to the council, then."

"Council?" asked a curious Sansa, sitting up.

Arya nodded, her voice rote and dry as she spoke. "We have a council now, made up of the North and Riverlands lords. Everyone has an equal say on topics, but I get the final vote in matters as Robb's proxy and Princess of the North."

"That doesn't sound like you," commented Sansa, eyes narrowing.

"That's because it's a jumble of what Uncle Brynden and Lord Bolton and Lady Brienne and Hermione have said to me," replied Arya, snark in her voice. "I did say I was having lessons, didn't I, stupid?"

Sansa felt a flash of annoyance, and it was suddenly like being back at Winterfell, her and Arya arguing over something stupid. "Arya," she growled.

Arya muttered something under her breath. "Anyway, what else is going on?"
Sansa hesitated. "Should I tell you or someone else?"

"Someone else?" Arya looked surprised as she echoed the words. "Well, I suppose Hermione could be told… Let me just go find her…"

Hesitation welled in Sansa, and she felt her palms become sweaty with nerves as Arya's face shifted to look at the dizzying fast trot of Winterfell's walls - Sansa turned her face away, taking a deep breath. *I've never spoken to Lady Hermione. She must be very powerful to help the North and the Riverlands as she has done… and I can understand why Lord Varys would be frightened of that… but I must remember that she is a friend to my family.*

"Hermione!"

"Arya?"

Sansa could hear the distant voices as they spoke through the open connection on the mirror, and swallowed quickly, dampening her lips before Arya's face appeared in the frame once more, stating, "Here's Hermione!"

The woman that Sansa had built in her mind was that of another Cersei - older, beautiful, with sharp eyes and a cruel mouth, possibly some exotic-looking woman from a far off realm, like Asshai or Yi Ti.

What Sansa saw, was a young woman slightly older than she was - at the same age she would put her brother and half-brother, and Margaery, perhaps - with voluminous, curly brown hair from an oval face. There was a splattering of freckles across her nose, and the most remarkable thing about the woman was her light brown eyes, that when the flickering light of a nearby candle caught them, they turned amber.

"Hello, Princess Sansa," greeted the witch, her voice a bit higher than Sansa was expecting as well. It was… surprisingly normal.

Then what she said registered and Sansa blinked. "Princess?"

"Your brother is a King," said Hermione, and her lips turned up at the corners in amusement.

Immediately, a part of Sansa grumbled, thinking that the entire time Joffrey had his Kingsguard beat her, attack her, or he would berate her, she was of an equivalent - or just below - royal standing. *Snot,* she thought darkly.

"How can I help you?" Hermione continued speaking.

"Has... Has Arya explained what I'm doing in King's Landing?" she began, stumbling over her words in her sudden bashfulness at the authoritative - but kind - tone Hermione spoke in.

The woman in the mirror nodded.

Sansa took a deep breath and continued. "Despite the upcoming royal wedding, things are tense here." She paused, but Hermione's face was understanding, and with a small nod, Sansa felt some confidence in their communication.

"Joffrey is..." she glanced around and went to lower her voice.

"No, wait," instructed the witch, her eyes narrowed in thought. "Prop the mirror up to your room, where there is an empty space, Sansa."
Confused, and hesitant, Sansa was slow to do so, but Hermione made no remarks about it. She turned to the pillows at the head of the bed, fluffed two of them, and then placed the mirror upright so it was propped against the Lannister red cover. From there, the view would be the length of the bed and the large open space at its foot.

"Thank you," said Hermione, her voice slightly distant.

Er… thought Sansa, feeling useless as she was sprawled on Tyrion's side of the bed, facing the mirror.

There was a loud crack, and then Hermione stood at the foot of the bed.

It was so unexpected, so completely alien that Sansa blinked for a solid thirty seconds in shock, her mouth hanging open as she jackknifed into a sitting position on the bed.

Hermione watched her, amused. "Hello."

"I— how— where?" stuttered Sansa, slowly sliding off the bed to stand at its side.

"A neat little skill I have," smiled Hermione, amber eyes also glittering like gold. "Now - you have something you think I need to hear, don't you? Let's doubly ensure that no one overhears us."

Sansa watched in disbelief as the young woman - because, in truth, that was what she was - flicked her wrist and a long wooden stick slid into it: her wand. She then raised it to point straight up, muttered something, and then Sansa heard the strangest buzzing noise, like the bees in Margaery's garden near the hives.

"What - what was that?" she asked, warily looking at the stick.

"I cast a muffliato," explained Hermione, not like that explained anything. "It stops anyone from listening to our conversation. They'll just hear that buzzing noise."

Then, Hermione looked around the room, her eyes keenly taking in the large living space, the stack of books on a table near the fireplace, the large bed, and her trunk at the foot. There was an adjoining door - to Tyrion's rooms - that remained closed and often locked.

Hermione made towards the seats by the fire, sinking into the one that Tyrion favoured with the stack at its side. With a disinterested casualness, her strange coloured eyes skimmed the titles, but Sansa could see that she was filing them away to explore later. Hermione then eyed the one opposite her and then back at Sansa in a blatant message.

Sansa took a deep breath, steeled her nerves, and thought: I'll pretend that Lady Hermione is just another daughter of a Lord that is visiting me. I shall offer her a drink and snack, and we'll converse like two, normal, young ladies.

That idea lasted all of three seconds when she used her stick - wand - to conjure up a teapot and delicate cups to hover between them. The teapot then tipped over the cups and poured directly into them piping hot liquid, never spilling or overflowing.

"Please," offered Hermione, indicating that Sansa should take the cup that was floating towards her. Hermione took the other. The witch raised the cup to her lips, sipped it, but kept her eyes focused firmly on Sansa. "So. Joffrey's wedding, and Joffrey himself. What did you want to say?"

Sansa blinked and then fumbled a bit with her own cup that she had brought to her lips. "Oh. Yes. Joffrey - well, he is insane. The things he does, it's mainly for his own pleasure, and it's usually at the
expense of someone else's humiliation or in the pleasure of their pain. The Queen has a hard time controlling him and his impulses."

There was a frown on Hermione's face.

"She spends her time trying to contain him, or planning on her own schemes to get her brother back-"

"Jaime Lannister?" Hermione interrupted, eyebrows flying up.

Sansa nodded.

"She plans to get him back?" continued the incredulous Hermione. "Does she even know where he is? Or what's happened to him?"

Sansa frowned. "I am not sure... all she ever says is that he's being kept by us Northern barbarians somewhere in the Riverlands."

She broke off as Hermione let out a loud laugh. The witch brought a hand up to cover her mouth, the corners of her eyes crinkled up in amusement. "Oh, Sansa, thank you for that."

The redhead blinked. "You're... welcome?" What? What did I say that was so amusing?

Hermione giggled a bit more, and then took a deep breath to calm herself. "Well, I'm glad some of our deceptions are working. Anyway, sorry about that. What else?"

Frowning, Sansa took a moment to compose herself. "The Queen keeps herself busy most of the time. When she's not trying to stop Joffrey from doing something, she's drinking or - um - with certain people."

In fact, thought Sansa darkly, she could probably keep up with Tyrion at this point in a drinking competition with how much Arbor Gold she's putting away.

"Certain people?" there was a wicked glint in Hermione's eyes and laconic drawl that equally oozed confidence and contempt. "Oh, I can't wait to use that somewhere. Any names?"

"Orys Kettleblack," supplied Sansa automatically, surprised at the sudden shift in her voice and tone. "Probably others. I —" she trailed off here, bringing her hands in front of her and wringing them nervously - a trait she had forced herself to stop doing shortly after her father's beheading. "I think Lancel is another."

"Lancel?" repeated Hermione, and under her breath, Sansa heard her mutter, "What kind of a name is 'Lancel' anyway? It's ridiculously close to 'Lancelot' and already I've got an idea of where this is going, Merlin."

"The Queen's cousin," replied Sansa, her voice small.

Hermione snorted, a highly unladylike sound. "Figures she'd keep it in the family."

Sansa turned bright red at the insinuation.

Hermione's eyes caught Sansa's and she all but demanded, "Does Tywin Lannister know?"

"Know?" squeaked Sansa.

"About his daughter? And eldest son? Or the cousins?"
Sansa shook her head quickly. "I'm sure there's been - rumours - but the Queen gets rid of her staff fairly quickly. And rumours are easier to ignore when they're fearful ones, kept mostly quiet."

"There's a saying where I'm from," said Hermione as she rolled her eyes. "Three can keep a secret if two of them is dead."

"That's…" Sansa's mouth turned down into a frown. "Morbid."

"And succinct." Hermione turned and surveyed the room. "So Tywin's wilfully ignorant of things, is he?"

"But he's very much in control," argued Sansa to Hermione's back as the woman began to move around, glancing out of the windows and balcony doors. "Everything is done on his say-so, except for the few who are entirely in the Queen's pockets. And I don't think there are that many. Besides, he lets Joffrey do quite a lot unless it hurts the Lannister name or truly would upset the small folk or court."

"What does he let Joffrey do?" asked a curious Hermione as she turned from the view - several red-brick towers, a small garden, and then the shining blue of the ocean beyond turning black as the moon slowly rose - to look at Sansa. Instead, she found the younger girl hunched, her face turned red and her hands, in front of her body, trembled.

"Sansa?"

Sansa swallowed her fear and glanced up. "He—"

When she looked away this time, it was in shame. Gods, how hard is it to admit? That he would have so-called noble men strip and beat me? That he would humiliate me in front of the court? Force me to see friends and my father's head? A gentle touch on her shoulder had Sansa gasp, flinch, and jerk back. Her eyes darted up, horror filling them as she saw Hermione's face - open, surprised - quickly shutter down into anger.

With narrowed eyes, the witch asked, her voice frosty, "Joffrey?"

Sansa, eyes wide, stuttered, "On his orders. The Kingsguard."

The amber eyes narrowed further. "Do you have any protection here?"

Sansa shook her head.

"No one at all?"

"Maybe," said Sansa quietly, "Since he came… Lord Tyrion has been kind… as much as he can be. And Shae, my handmaiden, she's quite protective."

"But they're not guards," sighed Hermione. "I think we should sneak one of our own in as a Lannister guard, at least for the next few days until the wedding. Once that's over and done with, I don't care how you feel about spying anymore, you're coming back to Winterfell. This has gone on enough."

And although Sansa was all prepared to be left behind - as she had been for some time in King's Landing - hearing those words from Hermione made something in her… pop. A worry; a fear, of some sort, no longer hung over her head.
Home, she thought wistfully. I'm going to go home, soon.

While she daydreamed of Winterfell's tall spires, the scent of winter roses and cinnamon, Hermione had her own mirror out and was finishing a conversation. "—if you don't mind, of course?"

"Not at all, Lady Hermione," said a male voice.

"Excellent. I'll Apparate to you, and then we'll Side-Along here," finished Hermione, ending her mirror call with whoever was on the other side. Catching Sansa's eyes, Hermione said, "I'll be right back."

She turned on her heel and disappeared with a crack, and along with it, Sansa heard the strange buzz from her spell dissipate as well. She could hear movement in the hallways, again; voices and people moving back and forth outside her room and over the balcony onto a landing several floors down.

Taking the time for some housekeeping, Sansa hid the mirror in her pillowcase. She'd move it back to her trunk or keep it on her later.

Another loud crack had her spinning around, breath caught in her throat. At Hermione's side, looking very green in the face, was a tall, broad shouldered man. His hair was dark in the flickering candlelight of her quarters, but the faint fuzz on his chin and cheeks was light enough to pass as blond. Sansa had never seen him before in her life.

Hermione, at the man's side, let go of his arm. He swayed but made a good attempt not to appear overcome from her magic, straightening his back.

"Princess Sansa," began Hermione, stressing her title, "Allow me to introduce you to Eddard Karstark, Lord Rickard Karstark's second eld-" she broke off, a wretched look on her face for a moment. Eddard's face shuttered, but the two recovered and Sansa watched as Hermione cleared her throat before continuing, her voice strained. "...that is, Lord Karstark's younger son."

Years of training overtook Sansa at that moment and she curtseyed, despite her intense curiosity. One of Father's men's sons! A Karstark! A northerner! Her head dipped and then she smoothly rose, blue eyes glancing over the man's square jaw and narrow eyes, and his rather implacable face.

"Princess," he said, reaching for her hand and kissing the back of it lightly.

"Edd here is going to be our pretend Lannister guard," explained Hermione. "He was the only blond I could think of quickly that was part of your brother's personal guard and he's been a good friend."

Sansa's eyes quickly flicked between the two. A good friend? But neither stood close, and the way that Hermione stood next to Edd was merely as someone who entered the room at the same time, not someone who pined to be in his presence. Something, however, tied them together.

"Now, Sansa," said Hermione, turning to face Eddard Karstark, whose genial expression slowly shifted into wariness. "Tell me: what do the Lannister guards wear?"

"My Lady," said Edd slowly, his tone hesitant. "Surely you're not going to alter my armour...?"

Hermione blinked. "Of course I am, Edd. Honestly, what did you think I was going to do?"

"But my Lady—!"

Sansa had never heard such a whine come from a grown man except for Joffrey, and while the King's was cruel and from a belligerent spoiled brat, Karstark's was almost playful - if not in truth,
slightly worried.

"Oh, grow up, Edd," muttered Hermione, and with a few flicks and swishes of her wand, Sansa watched in fascination as his boiled leathers turned into steel, changing in colour to gold. His ornaments - several very Northern in feature and design - disappeared, swallowed up into the armour and his woolen tunic and trousers changed fabric as well. As they changed shape around his legs, Eddard yipped.

Hermione glared at him.

"It's tight," he complained, shifting awkwardly.

She rolled her eyes and his boots turned into the soft leather ones that Sansa saw the men wear around King's Landing.

"He'll need a helmet," she said, absently, as she surveyed the tall Northerner in Lannister colours before her. He would certainly pass as one of them by looks. "But unfortunately he still sounds like a Northerner."

A mutter and one of Sansa's discarded and unfinished embroideries turned into a gold helmet with a nose guard. It floated over and then fit itself on Karstark's head. A look of abject misery was etched on the man's face.

"Best be mute then, Edd," grinned Hermione. "I'm sure you can survive a few days without mouthing off to anyone, right?"

He glowered.

Hermione turned back to Sansa. "Don't be a hero, okay? Your life is more important than any information you might learn, so if you think things are getting too dangerous - you call for Arya. Or me."

Sansa nodded, glancing over at her new protector. "Thank you, Lord Eddard." She then looked at Hermione. "And… thank you, Lady Hermione."


To both them, she stepped back and said, "See you in a few days."

And with a crack, she was gone.

"Do you normally have an evening guard, Princess?" asked Karstark quietly, trying to mumble so he didn't have a thick accent. He tilted his head and tried the sentence again, at a low volume, with a different accent.

Sansa stifled a giggle. "Sometimes."

"Then I'll stand guard tonight," he said, bowing to her and stepping out of the room promptly, leaving Sansa in a patch of candlelight. As she climbed into bed, blowing out a nearby candle, she realized that that was going to be the first time in a long time that she felt safe enough to sleep without a light on.

It was… a wonderful feeling and she fell asleep with a smile on her face.
Robb watched with a keen eye as Bill Weasley painfully and carefully traced the runes into the back of the mirror's case. At his side, his wife was making clucks with her tongue, or thoughtful hums as he etched the markings into the metal, a slow task with several discerning eyes watching him.

On the other side of the scarred man was Professor Flitwick, nodding along with commentary such as "oh, yes, excellent, just like that young William" or "Carefully now - just the tiniest flair on the edge of that rune." Despite being a charms master, the old professor was knowledgeable in several other fields and offered his criticisms to their cause freely.

Tense, Robb finally gave in to the urge to pace, wandering down one length of the kitchen toward the stove and then back, to the pantry wall. Harry, who was leaning against the beam that separated the extended dining room to the kitchen with his arms folded, watched him. His emerald eyes followed Robb's pacing steadily.

"You need to relax," said Harry suddenly.

"Harry!" warned Bill, his voice strained in tension. "Either speak or don't - but one or the other, okay, mate?"

Harry sent an apologetic look toward Bill, who didn't even look up from his work. Luna, however, at Flitwick's elbow, did and gave him a small smile.

"Sorry," said the Boy-Who-Lived, turning back to Robb. "As for you, you're going to upset yourself more by working yourself up into a state." Harry made a face. "Merlin, I sound like Molly." He sighed and pushed off the wall, placing himself in Robb's way.

"Harry," said the young King through gritted teeth. "Out of the way. I need to do something!"

"And you thought pacing was the right idea?" asked the black-haired young man, shaking his head.

"I can't do anything," replied Robb, tersely. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"Gobbstones?" suggested Luna, and Bill growled under his breath. The blonde peered at him and asked, "Is there something wrong with your throat, William?"

At his other side, his wife snickered.

"Please," implored Bill, finally looking up from the mirror, his face drawn. "Can you all just go somewhere else? Merlin."

"I think it is best if we leave William to it," declared Fleur, although there was a vague glint of amusement in her eyes. "Luna? 'Arry? Robb? Perhaps we can retire to the parlour. Your Grace, would you tell us about your family and 'ome, Winterfell?"

Glad to be distracted, although grumbling in the need to be, Robb silently acquiesced, following Harry as he and Fleur led him and Luna out of the kitchen. He also ignored Bill's breathy "finally," as he did so, and found he couldn't fault the man. But if something happened to that mirror...

With a sigh, he ran his hand through his auburn hair, letting it drop heavily to his side. Harry and Luna were already on a loveseat in the parlour, and Fleur had taken up as hostess, pouring tea from a delicate bone-white set with blue flowers running along the sides that Robb had never seen before at the dark Grimmauld Place.

*She must have conjured it, thought Robb, or transfigured it.* Then he startled, giving a little rueful
smile. How long have I been here that such words and ideas are now commonplace to me? Just three months and I can converse about magic as if I've known about it my entire life.

Fleur waited until everyone had sat, had a cup of tea (with the right amount of milk, honey, or lemon for each of the guests), and then asked, "Please; tell us about Winterfell."

Where to start? "Well… the first you should know is that the North is always cold - or at least, that's what the southerners say…"

Without realizing it, Fleur managed to get Robb to think positively of the North, Winterfell, and Westeros. He spoke about the cold winds from the North, that blew over Last Hearth and Karhold, down the Gift and towards the Neck; he spoke of the smell of the pines and Weirwood; he spoke of ice and snow in the midst of summer; he spoke of Sansa, her polite manners and her red hair, so alike and yet dissimilar to the Weasley red, of Arya and her stubbornness and tenacity, of Bran and his willful desires and dreams that ended when he fell from the Broken Tower, of Rickon and his ability to get into trouble and curiosity, and of Jon, his solemn half-brother who had more honour in his pinky finger than most others.

"-it was something that I always admired," said Robb, winding down from talking about his family to end on a melancholic topic of his father. "He said, 'the man who passes the sentence, swings the sword,' and I took that to heart. Any decisions that I make, I alone make them and should honour that decision by following through with action. Words make deeds."

Harry was nodding, while both Luna and Fleur were contemplative.

"Your family is - 'ow do you say? - so interesting," said Fleur, her chin cupped by her hands as she rested her elbows on her knees. "What a 'istory to know and 'ave claim to!" Her face smoothed out. "And my condolences on your father's death, Robb."

Robb's mouth pressed into a thin, wan smile. "Thank you, Fleur."

Before the silence could become oppressive, a throat was cleared. The four in the room turned to the entrance, where Bill stood.

"The mirror's ready," he said, looking at them all but finishing by holding his gaze with Robb. "We're ready when you are."

Immediately, the King leaped to his feet and was in the kitchen so fast, he thought he had magical powers and Apparated. Flitwick gently passed the mirror to him, and Robb cautiously looked at those who gathered around him by the kitchen island. "What do I do?"

"Use it like normal," instructed Flitwick, shaking his head and then speaking in fond, amazed tones, "Absolute genius! Genius, I say - Mr. Potter, your father and Sirius Black were quite the inventors, to create these mirrors. And for Miss Granger to then mimic it without the original as a reference! Why, simply marvelous!"

Robb looked around at the faces next to him: Harry's encouraging, hopeful one; Luna's curious; Fleur's radiant, and Bill's nervous, and took a deep breath. He held the mirror up to his face, taking in the pale colour of his cheeks, the dark circles under his eyes from sleepless nights.

"Hermione Granger."

His reflection continued to stare back at him.

"Hermione Granger," he said, his voice a bit stronger and more commanding.
Throat tight, he burst out, "Hermione Granger! Arya Stark! Sansa Stark! Hermione! Anyone?" He looked up. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

Bill frowned. "I— I'm not sure - the runes were all perfectly done—"

"But it's not working!" protested Robb angrily. "Why not? What did you do?"

"Whoa, hold on now," began Bill, his voice placating and calm as he held up two hands. "The runes are correct. Professor Flitwick, I, and several others conferred for weeks and ensured that these would be the right combination before we etched them."

"But—" Robb bit his lower lip in consternation. "Then why isn't it - connecting?"

Bill shrugged. "I don't know."

"Could 'Ermione not have the mirror with her?" suggested Fleur.

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't work like that. It would go foggy. Even if she didn't pick up on her end, the connection would be open on ours."

"So there is no connection," sighed Luna, eyeing the mirror in Robb's suddenly loose hands.

She drew her wand from behind her ear and cast a spell on it, making the mirror hover in the air as Robb's hand slid from it to his side. He then leaned forward and gripped the edge of the island counter.

"Why isn't there a connection with the mirror?" asked Robb, his voice tight and low. He kept his head bowed so he wasn't looking at anyone, focusing on the shiny marble countertop. "Why did the parchment work but not the mirror?"

There was silence.

Angrily, he stood straight and glared at those around him. "Well? Why not? Is someone going to answer me? You're all the magical folk here - you said you'd have an answer! What good is your magic if you can't help me?"

"Mate," said Harry quietly, stepping forward, "We are helping. We don't have all the answers."

"Well, why not?" shouted Robb, whirling to face Harry. "You're the Boy-Who-Lived! You've killed Dark Wizards and travelled through time, and saved the day! Why can't you get me back to my world? To my people? Huh?"

"No one is saying we can't," said Luna quietly, her large eyes catching Robb's. "We're just saying we don't know how yet. But we will."

"When?" asked Robb plaintively, his anger draining from him quickly. "Every moment that I'm here, the longer that I'm here - something could be happening back in Westeros to my sisters and brothers. To my people. To Hermione."

"We said we'd find a way," said Harry, placing a hand on Robb's shoulder. "And we will. Because you can bet that while we're doing what we can from here, Hermione'll be doing what she can from Westeros. And if anyone can figure things out, it's her. And all of us? We can do it, too."

"'Arry is correct," continued Fleur. "Believe in us."
Stricken, Robb stared at the earnest and understanding faces around him, and just - crumpled for a brief moment. He wasn't King Robb, first of his name; but rather, a twenty-one year old stuck in an unfamiliar land.

"I—" he broke off and swallowed thickly, closing his eyes tightly against the sudden burn. He inhaled sharply through his nose, bringing his hand up to rub at his mouth. He hoped it looked like he wasn't fighting tears. "I—"

"We know, Robb," said Harry quietly. "How about we go grab a lunch? And let everyone else figure out what's going on with the mirror, okay?"

Robb nodded.

A short thirty minutes later, the Young Wolf lobbed a dubious look at Harry, who in response shot him a grin. "Trust me, Robb. It's worth it. C'mon. Give it a go."

Despite the wheedling tone, Robb glanced from Harry's earnest and open face, and then down, to the squiggly noodle that hung between two pieces of wood in Harry's hand, and then further down into the yellowish soup-like bowl.

*This is so embarrassing*, thought Robb, grimacing, but he certainly didn't want to be considered craven by his only friend in Hermione's realm, so he gamely took a deep breath, picked up his spoon, and slurped a bit of the soup, noodle, and veg into his mouth.

Flavours, unlike that he ever experienced in Westeros, burst across his taste buds.

"What did I say?" Harry grinned, sounding far too pleased as he continued to eat his ramen.

This was not the first time Robb had ventured out into the capital city, but he could still count his trips on one hand and he never went alone. Harry was his de facto guide, forcing the King from Grimmauld Place when he would get lost in research or fall into a dark mood - quite like what happened earlier that morning.

(Once, Robb asked Harry how he just knew - how he seemed to appear at just the right time when Robb's moods were at their lowest and he was moments away from snatching the nearest breakable item to hurl at the wall.

Harry just levelled a look at him, and said, "Ask Ron about fifth year, one day. I have a lot of experience with anger.")

Despite the breaks between attempts to send Robb back to Westeros, or even to just contact Westeros, Robb found himself enjoying England. George gave Robb some sweaters to fit him, and Neville - one of the tallest in the Order - offered trousers until Harry took him shopping.

Now, weeks later, Robb found that he enjoyed the strangest things of England: the ease of their clothing - zippers were a gift from the Gods -, chocolate ice cream, owl post, and *the Quibbler*, and recently, Quidditch. And in learning about these things, he learned about Harry as well, who was the one who dragged him around ("I've never really played tourist in my own city, before! We can learn together!").

He wasn't ignoring the fact that it had been three months since he arrived in Hermione's world or that he and the others assigned to various tasks hadn't made a breakthrough in reaching Westeros. The parchment and scribbles meant that there was something coming and going between the two worlds, but that there was "signal interference," as Luna put it. They needed to refine that signal.
The lack of reaction from the mirror - one of the few personal items he had with him connected to not only Westeros, but Hermione - sent him spiralling and Professor Flitwick, Luna, Fleur Delacour-Weasley and Bill scrambling to discover why the mirror failed to work. As Robb's mood darkened, he was kidnapped by Harry to kill a few hours and to take Robb's mind off the mirror.

The two men finished their late lunch; Harry paid and they left the small restaurant. As always, Robb stopped as soon as they exited, and took a moment to marvel at the sheer size and scale of London. Intellectually, while he knew that the Citadel in Old Town was the tallest building in Westeros, it paled in comparison to the number of skyscrapers and flats that packed people in the dense city. King's Landing at its fullest would never come near the population that London had.

Harry, as always when Robb did this, smiled patiently.

"The air smells different," said Robb abruptly. "That's something I miss of Winterfell and Westeros. The air is cleaner. Here… it's muggy, dirty."

"The joys of progress and advancement," commented Harry idly, shoving his hands into his pockets. "C'mon, there's a Waterstones nearby. Hermione'd kill me if I didn't take you to one bookstore the entire time you're here."

The Waterstones was two floors, and for Robb, it was eye-opening. There are so many books! Maester Luwin would have loved this. The glossy covers, the variety of topics… they caught Robb's attention and he trailed down on the aisle to the next, stopping here and there to reverently pick something up from the display, marvelling at the multiple copies down to the exact detail. Harry followed along behind, pursuing his own interests in the same aisle.

Eventually, they ended up in military history. Robb's mouth dropped open at the titles, mouthing them as he squinted at some, turned sideways, on the shelves. The Templars, SAS Ghost Patrol, Churchill's Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare, Praetorian, World War II at Sea, the Norman Conquest, Napoleon the Great. There were names of men (and some women) who did things that he never thought possible; wars that Hermione's realm experienced that devastated countries and toppled governments. There were even some wars that were ongoing (not like Robb could tell - London seemed detached from the politics of far off countries).

But the covers - of flying machines, men dressed in armour, not of steel, but professional business attire, men and women who spied in the enemy's strongholds, maps of places Robb would never see or visit. Photographs, as Harry called them, pictures taken immediately during or after a battle. It hit Robb hard to see such destruction and he could only think back to his own trek through the Riverlands, the pillaging of the small folk and their lands, and even of the ruin that as the Crag.

Harry came to a stop next to him, glancing down at the cover. "Oh, Churchill. Wartime leader. A national hero."

"He was your King?" asked a curious Robb.

"Prime Minister," answered Harry. "Our King at the time was George - our Queen's father. Most royalty is figureheads now, including ours. They can still make decisions and vetoes as a constitutional monarchy, but for the most part, we're ruled by our Prime Minister and their cabinet government."

Robb frowned, looking back at the large man on the cover of the book he was holding. "What was so special about this Churchill?"

Harry gave a wry smile that was more pained remembrance than fondness. "'All the great things are
"Simple, and many can be expressed in a single word: freedom, justice, honor, duty, mercy, hope."

"That is very true," mused Robb thoughtfully.

"And then there's one of my favorites," continued Harry, fixing his emerald eyes on Robb's blue and holding his stare. "'Never, never, never give up.'"

Message received, thought Robb.

They left the Waterstones shortly after, Robb with a few books from the military history section, and a new drive for research.

He'd find a way home, to his sisters, his brothers; a way home to his people in the North and those in the Riverlands; even find his way back to Hermione. And he wasn't ever going to give up looking.

Hermione once thought organizing her Hogwarts notes and colour coding them, as well as planning a month-to-month study planner for herself, Harry, Ron, and sometimes Neville, was difficult. Clearly, she had never attempted to help run two countries before.

When she wasn't following Arya along to sessions with the Blackfish, Karstark, or Bolton, she was sequestered in the office she purloined of an antechamber near the tower where the war room was located. Carion, their Maester, had become used to the trek between the tower where their ravens were located and her office, as well as the number of others she often sent him to (she didn't trust the man with a mirror just yet); as a result of running about, he had lost a stone in weight already.

Hermione found herself exercising her magic far more freely than she ever had - even at Hogwarts. People like Arya, Lyra Mormont, Karstark, Bolton, and even Bracken and Blackwood were used to her Apparating here and there or shrinking items, or floating them, or changing the colour of something; even removing the stench of rotted wood from damaged rooms, or worrisome bloodstains. They often encouraged her to use magic in front of them - Bolton, Blackwood, Bracken, and Umber especially - to the point that sometimes, Hermione felt like a performing monkey.

However, the upside to her magic use was that it was becoming… not just easier, but more instinctual to use. She had noticed that her magic was tied to her emotions - particularly at the Twins - and it preferred to be let loose. There was no reason for it - she was a grown witch and had left her days of accidental magic behind years ago, and she never quite had the same level of power and refined control that Harry had when casting powerful magic.

Another upside was that if she was Apparating from one location to the next, her guard often found it difficult to track her down on time. Once she even escaped Patrek and Locke's guard for half a day, popping from one location to another, at different ends of Winterfell, leaving whomever she was previously with to tell them, "You just missed her."

(They were not amused when they eventually caught up with her at dinner.)

She had Lucas Blackwood as company on the inside of her office, and it was admirable to watch him try to stay awake next to the warm and cozy fire. His head bobbed and dipped as he fought sleep. Outside the door, she knew Wendyl Manderly drew lots for the night.

Now, however, it was very late at night. She was at her desk, going through the incoming correspondence that Carion gave her, reading them, copying them with gemino for the others and then spelling the content to the parchments so everyone had a copy, or drafting replies.

There were two sets of candles on her desk at either end providing her desk with light - something
she was used to from her Hogwarts days - and other than the fireplace crackling and hissing every so often, the only other light came from a near full moon that spilled in from the thick, murky glass in the window.

Mindful of Sansa's spying, or if Arya needed her, Hermione had her mirror propped against a short shelving unit she devised to hold outgoing or shuffled mail, but she paid the reflective surface little mind, as she was caught up reading a response from Maege Mormont, who had arrived at Castle Black a few days ago.

_It's a bloody mess_, wrote Maege. _My brother is dead - no one will tell me how other than it happened during the Great Ranging. Over one hundred Night's Watchmen went out, and barely forty have returned with many more considered lost or dead Beyond the Wall._

_Merlin_, thought Hermione, sinking back in her chair. Her eyes glanced over at the map that hung above her fireplace mantle, one that predominantly featured the North, the Gift, and the Wall, and what they knew of beyond it. With only three working castles to guard the Wall, it was no wonder that there was an increase in wildling attacks - if only forty survived the Great Ranging, their numbers were dire!

Rubbing at her eyes, Hermione finished reading the note. _Maester Aemon, as well as Lord Stewart Bowen Marsh, are asking for help. They claim that the Wildlings are on the march towards the Wall and intend to take it. However, given your thoughts on particular matters, my Lady, Lord Flint and myself have done some probing in what exactly happened during the Great Ranging._

_There are few answers - and none will admit that it was anything other than Wildlings that decimated their numbers. Yet, I do not believe them. I would appreciate you taking the time to confer with Lords Tully, Karstark, Umber, and Bolton, regarding their thoughts on the matter. A visit from yourself might be beneficial, as well._

She then signed off, with the date - only two days previous - the note below her name. The news was troubling, as it indicated dissent in the ranks of the only people protecting the North and Riverlands from potentially an army of Inferi, something Hermione didn't want to think about. She had several texts from her tent laid out across the desk, all open or bookmarked to various pages on Inferi and their history, weaknesses, and even one text from Grimmauld Place that explained how to make them, which sent her to the toilet.

Opening her homemade planner, she used a self-writing quill to pencil in _visit Castle Black soon_ under the tasks section.

Another note, from Lord Artor Wayn in the Riverlands, mentioned something about finding the remains of several Frey bannermen, who had not been at the Twins when Hermione had enchanted them all into a sleep - as well as executed the men and women involved with the attack - savaged and torn apart, or hung on trees. Someone was continuing a form of justice, and it wasn't Hermione or any of those who rallied to Robb's kingship. It was confusing, and Hermione didn't like the idea of someone else going around and stirring up trouble when she didn't have control of the situation.

And _worse_, another note passed on from both Manderly and Ser Quincy Cox, mentioned that anyone trading from Essos in their ports (which was rare itself), mentioned that there _were dragons_ in Essos. _Dragons!_ Hermione thought she was finished with dragons beside mentions in books, the TriWizard Tournament, and breaking out of Gringotts on the back of one!

_This world is incredibly and exceedingly bizarre_, she thought darkly, letting her face fall into her hands as she propped herself up on the desk. She fought the urge to let go of her temper and sweep her desk of the remaining notes.
Her heart was pounding and there was a headache blossoming behind her eyes in time to her racing heart. She grit her teeth and breathed deeply through her nose.

And, in the middle of her simmering temper, Sansa's frantic, chirping voice spoke from the mirror.

"Hermione? Lady Hermione? Can you hear me?"

Hermione perked up, bringing her hands partially down as she peered over at the mirror, where Sansa's face now took up the frame. Her red hair was dishevelled, her blue eyes wide, and her usually pale face had turned the colour of sour milk.

She reached forward and grabbed it. "Sansa?"

The girl closed her eyes in relief. "Oh, thank the Gods. I wasn't sure I'd reach you!"

"What's wrong?"

The teenager glanced this way and that, looking around where she was, the image bouncing a little as she was walking quickly, apparently. Hermione frowned. "Where's Edd?"

"He's here," said Sansa, her voice low. "I'm nearly at my rooms - I'll tell you then—"

Hermione's frown deepened, her curiosity growing alongside anxiety, until Sansa was in her quarters and then shut the door, doing a weird little check under beds, up the chimney, and around the balcony before standing in the middle of the room.

"Joffrey's dead."

Hermione pushed back from the desk and stood from her chair before she realized what she was doing. "What?"

Sansa nodded. "A few days ago, now. Choked on a poison at his own wedding. I saw it happen - we all did. It was..." she shuddered, closing her eyes as she remembered. Her voice dropped until it was a bare hint of breath. "I hated him. I'm glad he's dead."

"Is his younger brother King now?" Hermione thought back at some of the things Arya had told her about the Lannister family. "What's his name?"

"Tommen will be sworn in shortly," agreed Sansa, "Before the trial."

Dread crept through Hermione's curiosity and anxiety. "Trial?"

There was some mumbling - Hermione heard Edd say something but wasn't sure what - and then the mirror was plucked from Sansa's hand and Edd's face filled the mirror instead. "The Princess won't tell you, so I will. When the King shit—"

"Lord Eddard!"

"—died, the Queen bitch lost it. She started screaming that it was all the Imp's fault because he was the one serving the brat wine. Guards arrested him, and then arrested Sansa because she's his wife." Eddard's face was emotionless as he spoke, but Hermione saw the tightening of his jaw, the narrowing of his eyes and saw his anger.

She blinked before blurring, "WHAT?" loudly. Quickly, her thoughts rallied. "You mean to tell me Sansa was in prison? How did she get out? Did you help her? Do you need to escape? I can be there shortly and pop you out-"
There was a scuffle and then Sansa took the mirror back.

"I'm fine," she said, glowering a little to the Karstark guard and it was more real emotion than Hermione had ever seen on the teen's face.

"You're fine now," Edd muttered, but loud enough Hermione heard. "I didn't know where you were for two days!"

"Two days!" echoed Hermione, her voice shrill as it rose. On his chair, Lucas woke with a snort, his hand immediately going to his sword just as Wendyl crashed through the door, forcing it open and his sword held aloft and ready to swing.

"My Q—My Lady, are you alright?" burst out Wendyl, his form taunt as his eyes surveyed the office.

"What's happened?" asked Lucas, looking at the mirror.

Hermione ignored the two, grit her teeth, and said, her voice strained, "Tell me everything. Now."

Sansa, sensing the volatile topic, quickly explained: "I'm fine; they had me in a prison in the dungeons for half a day. I was scared, especially because I didn't know where Lord Eddard was. But several guards came and got me out by the end of the day, and I was sent back to my quarters under house arrest. No one was allowed to see me for the next day, with the exception of my meals brought to me. That's what Lord Eddard meant."

Hermione let her breath escape. She hadn't realized she had been holding it. She leaned over her desk, gripping the edge of it. "Right. Well, I think we're done with this spying nonsense. I'll come get you—"

"Please wait!" implored Sansa.

Hermione blinked. "Why?"

Sansa looked at her side, sharing a look with Edd, but she then spoke, slowly. "Tyrion is going to be on trial for Joffrey's murder tomorrow. I'm supposed to go and watch in the stands and probably be a witness. Lord Tywin has already spoken to me about turning against Tyrion, telling me that I should condemn him."

"Lord Tyrion doesn't deserve the farce of a trial," explained Sansa. "We never - that is—" she blushed furiously, glancing at Edd again off the mirror face. "—he's not my husband, Lady Hermione, but he was kind to me when no one else was. There have been others, who pretended to be kind and I… if I didn't know that you were coming, I think I might have taken Ser Dontos on his offer."

Who the hell is Ser Dontos? thought Hermione uncharitably, scowling.

"I just… If I could…" Sansa stumbled over her words, took a deep breath, and then said, "I'd want to find a way to support him, or show him he's not alone."

Ah, I see now, the witch thought, nodding to herself.

In a moment, her thoughts turned inward, and she went over the information Sansa provided her. Someone had killed Joffrey - realizing that he was a danger to Westeros, but Hermione imagined
it was someone close to home, so to speak, who did the deed. It left a minor power vacuum, but
given that Tommen was barely ten, he would hardly rule; someone was going to be a puppet master -
most likely Tywin Lannister. And if he was presiding over the trial, in order to mock his son, well -
that was something Hermione could take advantage of.

"When is this trial supposed to happen?" asked Hermione, ignoring Lucas and Wendyl's curious
faces.

"Tomorrow morning," Sansa repeated, her eyes flickering around Hermione's face through the
mirror. "Hermione, are you…?"

"Sansa, put Edd on, okay? Just for a moment," she ordered.

Surprise bloomed on Sansa's face, her eyes widening and her mouth dropping open, but before she
could formulate anything, Edd took the mirror from her and Hermione spoke to him directly.

"Are you going to be with her all night?"

"Yes," replied Edd.

"Good. Keep watch and don't let anyone in at all," instructed Hermione. "And if someone does try,
call me on the mirror immediately. I'll be there by dawn."

Edd cocked his head a tiny bit. "Just you?"

"Oh, no," replied Hermione, a small grin on her mouth. "I've got a few others in mind."

Edd nodded and passed the mirror back to Sansa, whose brows had furrowed over her eyes, which
had also darkened. The Princess was not happy with Hermione.

"And what shall I do?" she asked, her tone caustic.

"Sansa," began Hermione, "You're one of the most important pieces. Just stay safe tonight.
Tomorrow you'll be in Winterfell."

Before allowing any more discussion, Hermione signed off on the mirror, looking up at Lucas and
Wendyl. As Hermione's gaze settled on them, they both stood up straight.

"My lady?" asked Lucas.

"Gather the rest of the guards," she said, moving around her desk, barely pausing to use her magic to
wrench the door open after it swung shut behind Wendyl earlier. Neither man commented on it, or
her lack of wand use. "I'm going to find Lord Karstark and Lord Bolton."

She spun around so she was walking backward. "Oh, and boys? Quickly. There's only so many
hours until dawn, and we need to prepare."

Both nodded and ran off in opposite directions.

Finally, thought Hermione, viciously.

Hours later, just as the barest sliver of soft yellow brushed over the glittering Northern landscape,
Hermione burst into a particular room. It was small, cramped, and only had a single window over a
single bed (one that was rather long and large for this man). An empty bottle of some kind of alcohol
rolled around on the flagstone floor. Nearby a side table, where another bottle lay on its side, a small
trickle dripping from the opening and onto the toe of a discarded, unlaced boot.

Hermione, uncaring of not only the hour, or the man's modesty, sent a stinging hex at him.

The man roared his displeasure, jackknifing up and reaching under his pillow for a dagger that he thrust out. It would've embedded itself in any other person's neck, but Hermione cast *protego* and it bounced off her invisible shield.

"The fuck?" the man slurred, eye narrowed and unfocused with sleep.

"*Lumos*," intoned Hermione, and a soft light filled the dark chamber. The man was still sitting up in bed, so Hermione beamed at the tall man with lanky black hair and scarred face.

"What the fuck are you doing here, witch?" the man growled, dropping his hand with the dagger as he began to blink the sleep from his eyes.

"Clegane," began Hermione, "What do you say about a mission in King's Landing that involves bloodshed, mayhem, and the rescue of one Sansa Stark?"

In response, Clegane reached over the side of his bed and yanked on his boots. "When do we leave?"

Sansa slept fitfully the night before after Hermione abruptly ended their conversation, and now stood with Eddard at her side, wringing her hands in front of her body. She glanced nervously at the tall man whose company - although mostly silent - she had begun to enjoy. He stood tall and silent, eyes forward, facing the large empty space they had made in the predawn hour.

Then, suddenly - *crack!*

Hermione stood at the front of a group, wearing all black. Sansa goggled at the outfit - *so improper!* - at the leather trousers, the long, split black jacket and undershirt shirt in grey. Her curly hair was pulled back from her face in some type of simple ponytail.

Behind and beside her were a few familiar faces: Sansa recognized Lord Karstark and Lord Bolton, two men who did sometimes visit Winterfell when her father was alive. There were two very tall men; one had a wild, excited look about him, and the other had a white-ish beard and eyes similar to her and her mother.

"Niece," that man spoke, stepping from the group to drop before Sansa.

"Uncle...?" blinked Sansa, casting her mind back. Her only Uncle was her mother's brother, Edmure, but *her mother* had an uncle, too: Brynden Tully, the Blackfish. *Then this must be...!* Sansa's eyes grew wide. "Great-Uncle Brynden?"

"You can call me the Blackfish if you please," he said gently, smiling at her.

Sansa stifled a sob of happiness. This was real! She was with family! There were Northerners here to protect her!

As she reached forward to embrace her great-uncle, a distant part of her recognized that Edd was greeting his father and another young man with brown, floppy hair; and Bolton and the other tall man had their swords out.

"Be careful with that, Lord Umber," cautioned Hermione, but there was a grin on her face.
"Lord Umber, of Last Hearth! thought Sansa, pulling back from her Uncle as he stood and drew his sword. These are Robb's men. These men are from his army.

"Sansa is going to lead us to the trial," Hermione was instructing, and Sansa had missed a portion of it. "I'll make sure to cast Notice-Me-Nots along the way so we aren't disturbed as we go. This is going to be like the Twins - quick and silent."

"But bloody?" asked a hopeful Umber.

Hermione nodded. "Anything in gold that walks by - just make it quiet."

"What of the guards meant to escort Princess Sansa?" asked the floppy-haired young man.

Hermione's smile grew. "I'll handle that. We won't need them as a guide. Theoretically, we won't need Sansa, either, but I don't want her left behind while we all move."

Neither do I, thought Sansa. The idea of being left behind - again - made her shiver.

"Let's form a V-position as we go," continued Hermione. "Sansa will be up front with me, with a guard. The rest of you - well. Happy hunting."

The rest of those in the room clumped together to begin last minute preparations with Hermione. Hermione knelt by the men's feet, her wand tapping against their boots, and Sansa, in confusion, just shook her head and turned away from the sight.

Instead, Sansa found herself standing just off to the side, almost hyperventilating with the idea of going home. She had nothing to pack except her mirror and what was in her trunk. She would be happy to be rid of this place.

"Hello, little bird."

Sansa gasped, spinning. How did she miss him? His height? His presence? Behind her, a strange look in his eyes, stood Sandor Clegane. In some ways, he hadn't changed: he was still tall, with shoulder-length black hair, and he was still scarred. He carried the same sword, and still had that affected air of I-don't-care-go-away-leave-me-alone. But… there was something, different too…

With a critical eye, Sansa noticed the different colours he wore, the leather bracers across his chest were distinctly Northern, as were the fur-lined cloak. It was a good look for him.

"Ser—" she began.

He rolled his eyes. "How many times, girl?"

Sansa, emboldened by nostalgia, smiled. "A few times more, Ser Sandor. I am, after all, just a silly girl."

The two fell silent, eyes locked on one another, but there was a hint of a smile on Clegane's lips.

"Sansa?" the redhead turned. Hermione was watching her carefully. "We're going to be going shortly. Is there anything you want to take with you?"

"Just my trunk," she replied, pointing at it.

She watched in awe as the trunk shrunk to a small, manageable size, and Hermione picked it up and handed it to Sansa, who tucked it in the bodice of her dress. She then handed her a small wolf pin.
"This is a PortKey," explained Hermione as Sansa gingerly held the excellent metalwork in her hand. "At a preset word, it'll transport you back to Winterfell - which will be as soon as we reach the trial. I won't tell you the word - I'll say it myself at the right time - and you'll end up in the Great Hall. Arya, as well as Brienne, will be waiting for you."

Hermione glanced up and over Sansa's shoulder. "Clegane, make sure you have a hold on Sansa when this happens - you know the word - because you're going to go back with her. Your job is to watch over Princess Sansa."

Clegane didn't speak, but he must have done something as Hermione relaxed slightly.

A knock on Sansa's door made everyone tense.

"Showtime," she heard Hermione mutter.

After that - it all went quick.

Hermione opened the door, and upon seeing the two guards' surprise that it wasn't Sansa who opened it, Hermione took advantage and hit them both with a cutting charm to their necks. Without any warning, she caught them with a *wingardium leviosa*, bringing them into the room.

There was a spray of blood by the doorframe and on the inside of the room, but Hermione vanished it and then poked her head out, checking both ways.

"Clear," she said, her voice hard. "Let's go."

Sansa stepped up to Hermione's side, Clegane just behind her; from there, the others fanned out.

"Point Me, Tywin Lannister," muttered Hermione, her wand flat on her hand as it spun several times until it pointed southwest. She looked up, caught everyone's eyes once, and then they were moving.

Hermione had never deliberately stalked the way she was doing now; in all her adventures with Harry and Ron, they were on the defensive, on the run, the ones throwing up spell after spell to keep alive. She had never been in the predator position before, but it felt good. Her magic sang, thrumming through her veins as they walked down the hallways.

Any servants they spotted, Hermione stunned, leaving them on the floor where they crumpled. Guards, if they approached from in front, were summoned with her right hand - as her left had the compass spell - and then slammed behind her and Sansa right into the path of her guard and the Lords.

Hermione did not allow Sansa to look back - the girl had, a few times, turned her head, but Hermione distracted her, catching her eyes and shaking her head and once even Clegane stepped into the path directly behind Sansa so she couldn't see the carnage they were leaving behind.

Even if she couldn't see, she could hear.

And she could imagine.

Hermione didn't have to look to know what was behind them: there were the soft gurgles of soldiers and men choking on their own blood, the pained, little cries of those being run through, the heavy *thunk* their bodies made as they collapsed on the floor and were left there.

The smell of copper and iron was heavy.
Eventually, they reached where they needed to be - there was more foot traffic, and Hermione had to slow them down and cast a disillusion spell. In one long line, they hugged along the wall, with Hermione at the head, peering around at a large guarded wooden door. The men on either side held spears, not swords. Behind, there were murmurs and the sound of people talking - even jeering. The trial had already begun.

She looked up, following the smooth walls of the Keep to where wooden beams crisscrossed. Slightly recessed was a catwalk, and some flickering light. If Hermione was to guess - there was a balcony overlooking the trial room.

"That's the throne room," Sansa, right behind her, whispered. "Tommen must already be King."

"Time for you to go," whispered Hermione, turning to Sansa.

The teen stared at Hermione, something in her face torn between relief and indignation of not being able to follow this through. Behind her, Clegane put a hand on her shoulder.

"Ready?" at Sansa's tentative nod, Clegane tightened his hand and scowled. Hermione grinned. "Go, go, Gryffindor."

Then they were gone, the space where the two stood empty.

Patrek sidled up into the empty spot. "Now what, my Lady?"

Hermione jerked her head at the two spearmen. "Them. A distraction and then Umber can have some fun."

"With pleasure," the Lord of Last Hearth grinned, hefting his large sword from hand to hand. It was stained red and beads rolled down toward the hilt.

"Anyone volunteering for the distraction?" asked Hermione.

Eddard sighed. "I'm the only one dressed like a Lannister still. I'll do it."

He stepped out and around the group, a purposeful swagger to him as he turned around the corner and walked toward the two guards.

They glanced at one another, and then one called, "Halt! This is a closed trial. You can't—"

As they focused on Edd, they missed Umber sneaking up on them with the disillusion spell still on him; he blended in to the sand colour of the walls and had cut down the one spearman while the second spoke.

"What the—?" the spearman turned, eyes under his helm widening in shock.

He shouldn't have taken his eyes off Edd, who promptly unsheathed his sword and rammed it through the guard between the chest plate and chin guard. He had a moment of stunned horror, and then as Edd yanked the sword back, all at eye level, the guard slid noiselessly to the floor.

Hermione stepped out from the corner. "Up we go."

"How?" asked Umber, cleaning his sword with the dead Lannister guard's tunic.

Hermione tilted her head up and grinned.

"Oh. Oh no," moaned Edd. "I remember this. I saw you and Dacey practice this once and you
Hermione tossed the grin at Edd. "My first victim."

"My lady—! No!" Edd whined but Hermione's magic caught him around the waist and with *wingardium leviosa* directing the large soldier, Edd flew up and over the short rail on the catwalk. Once he had his balance, his Lannister uniform and armour changed back to his Northern-style pieces, and he ran his hands down his chest and sighed with relief.

Patrek, grinning, followed Edd up onto the catwalk; a grumbling Umber was next, and then the Blackfish, Karstark, and Bolton with Hermione last.

"Shall we?" asked Hermione in a whisper, and they followed her down the catwalk, towards the flickering candlelight. The catwalk entered a long, arched tunnel, one that was tight and made Umber mutter a curse. It was the same colour as the other walls, but fairly dark without any sconces to light the way.

At the end of the tunnel, the catwalk opened up along one side of the throne room. Thick stone pillars that ran from the floor to the high ceilings cut into portions of the walk; there were three in total on each side of the room. Their colours were darker, a shade of green that appeared black, closer to the top of the ceiling.

Still under the disillusionment spell, Hermione and the others crept along so they were evenly spaced out. On one side of Hermione's was Bolton, his cool eyes surveying the long aisle leading to the iron throne, a disgustingly tacky chair made of the shards of swords. There were three-tiered stands on either side of the aisle filled with the court, and upon a raised dais where the iron throne was, were sets of chairs on either side for the royal party.

Tywin stood next to the chair, where a young, blond teen in a brown tunic sat uncomfortably. Directly opposite them as the prisoner's box, where Tyrion stood, shackled in place by irons clasped around his wrists, linked together into a hook on the box. At either side were two stone-faced Lannister guards.

The young teen on the throne stood, and then so did everyone in the stands.

"I, Tommen of the House, Baratheon, the first of my name, the King of the Andals..." Hermione began to tune him out. *Merlin, and I thought that Malfoy could whinge on...!*

Soon he named two other men in addition to Tywin, and Hermione perked at the recognizable one of Oberyn Martell. Her eyes darted to the man, dressed in bright yellow of his house's colour. She wasn't surprised that he was a distinguished-looking man, good-looking but proud and arrogant that came from the knowledge of experience and confidence. He sat in a free chair to the left of the throne from where Hermione perched; next to Tywin on the throne – and, oh, how Hermione felt her ire rise at the sight! – was a larger man in a blue tunic with a beige-toned waistcoat – *that must be Mace Tyrell.*

Then teen then left and Hermione found herself scowling. *Not even a kind word or a 'good luck' to his uncle? What a twat.*

"—stand accused by the Queen Regent of regicide. Did you kill King Joffrey?" Tywin's voice barely changed in register as he spoke.

Tyrion just shook his head and glanced away, saying plainly, "No."

"Did your wife, Lady Sansa?"
Lord Karstark, several meters down from where Hermione stood, audibly and loudly hissed at the accusation toward Sansa.

Tyrion, on the other hand, shrugged. Glibly, he replied, "Not that I know of."

"How would you say he died then?"

Hermione stifled the urge to roll her eyes and groan. What sort of leading question was that? Her world's lawyers would have a field day with a case like this.

"—or the pigeons, just leave me out of it."

There were some twitters and Cersei – the blonde Queen clutched at her chair's armrests. Hermione felt her lips quirk up. *I think I like you, Tyrion Lannister. You'll make this easier on me, so my thanks.*

A parade of crown's witnesses – each set up to damn the man on trial – then appeared. They were carefully cultivated and as they progressed, the more Tyrion leaned against the edge of his prisoner's box, rolling his eyes. At first, he tried to argue back – but when Tywin shot him down, Hermione only shook her head.

"—was found on the body of Ser Dontos—" the Maester on the stand pulled a glittering silver necklace from his robes, and Hermione sighed. *Jewelry? Are they going to accuse Tyrion of cross-dressing next?*

"When are we going to move?" hissed Patrek from down the line.

"Not yet—" Hermione's reply was cut off as the Maester continued.

"—spiriting Sansa Stark, the wife of the accused, away from the feast," the feeble, white-bearded man said. She wore this necklace the day of the wedding. The residue of the most rare, and terrible poison, was found inside."

"*Lies!*" growled one of the men, and Hermione shushed him, bracing a foot on the low banister of the catwalk and leaned forward.

The crowd murmured at the accusations, and let the Maester lead their thoughts to Sansa aiding Tyrion in Joffrey's murder with the poison.

*What tosh,* thought Hermione, glad they had spirited Sansa away. Even if she *had* confessed in the way that Tywin wanted her to, against Tyrion, it would've been hard to keep her free and safe from being married to someone else after the trial finished.

"—perhaps his marriage to Sansa Stark made him more sympathetic to the Northern cause," the bald-headed man on the stand was saying.

"Here, here," muttered Bolton on Hermione's side. "If that's the case, I say we take the one Lannister I think I could actually stand to be around back with us."

He glanced at Hermione, who let a tiny smile slip free for him to see. He gave a firm nod, and returned to watching the trial.

"You're excuse, Lord Varys," Tywin said, and Hermione started. She whipped her head around, ponytail catching her cheek as she realized that the man who was just on the stand was one Sansa warned her about – as someone who detested magic.
I'll keep my eye on you, thought Hermione.

When the last witness was brought in, a woman in a pink dress, Tyrion stood straight, mouth dropping open. From where she stood, Hermione could see Tyrion's mouth tighten and his form quiver. As the woman spoke, Hermione could see him break, and he collapsed against the wall of the prison box.

Bolton scoffed, and Hermione turned to look at him, eyes wide.

"This is a farce," he muttered, tilting his head down at the scene below. "I almost pity the man. This has gone on long enough."

Shae was moved to the side from the witness box, and although she kept her head slightly bowed, Hermione could see her fold her arms and tightly grip the flesh. She was resolutely ignoring Tyrion's rather shell-shocked face, one that quickly morphed into disbelief and anger.

I agree, thought Hermione. It was painful, watching the mockery of a trial, the crowd laughing at Tyrion's humiliation.

At least Tyrion seemed to know that it wasn't really for killing Joffrey, but rather for being a disappointment to Tywin - a punishment for the loss of his wife. Even if Sansa hadn't had said that Tyrion had been kind to her, Hermione still probably would do what she was planning.

"Father... I wish to confess," said Tyrion, his voice quiet in the chamber, trembling in anger. "I wish to confess!"

Tywin, eyebrows raised, which Hermione found comical given his eye patch, confirmed, "You wish to confess?"

Tyrion's mouth firmed and he spoke, not addressing his father, but the court. Malice coated his every word. "I saved you. I saved this city and all your worthless lives! I should have let Stannis kill you all!"

The court was muttering, and further down the catwalk, Hermione heard Patrek give a tiny cheer. "You tell 'em, Imp!"

"Tyrion! Do you wish to confess?"

Tyrion swung his head around to face his father from his place on the box. "Yes... Father. I'm guilty. Guilty! Is that what you want to hear?"

"You admit you've poisoned the King?" Tywin's single eye narrowed.

There was an ugly look on Tyrion's face. "No. Of that, I'm innocent. I'm guilty of a far more monstrous crime. I'm guilty of being a dwarf!"

Tywin sighed. "You are not on trial for being a dwarf."

"Oh, yes I am!" countered Tyrion angrily, his shackles jangling as his arms shook in his anger. "I've been on trial for that my entire life!"

Hermione felt like she was watching a match at Wimbledon, bouncing back and forth between the two Lannister men. From her seat, Cersei watched on, fascinated and gleeful.

"Have you nothing to say on your defense?" asked an exasperated Tywin.
"Nothing but this," said Tyrion loudly, turning to face the court on their raised seats, "I did not do it. I did not kill Joffrey, but I wish that I had!" He turned to face his elder sister, spitting the next words. "Watching your vicious bastard die gave me more relief than a thousand lying whores!"

He glared at Shae, and Hermione wondered just how she was going to tell Sansa how this went. Tyrion then turned back to the crowd, and continued. "I wish I was the monster you think I am. I wish I had enough poison for the whole pack of you. I would gladly give my life to watch you all swallow it!"

The crowd broke into angry calls and cries, and Hermione waved her hand at either side of the men with her, signalling them to get ready.

"On my mark!" she said, using the crowd's voice to cover her own.

Over the crowd, Tywin was shouting. "Ser Meryn! Ser Meryn, escort the prisoner back to his cell!"

"I will not give my life for Joffrey's murder, and I know I'll get no justice here, so I will let the gods decide my fate," shouted Tyrion, and the crowd went quiet to hear his next words. Instead of the low growl he had, they were singularly clear and concise. "I demand a trial by combat!"

There was silence.

Then, Cersei started laughing. It was a horrible, wretched sound. "You? Trial by combat? Will you fight, Tyrion?" Her face twisted and it resembled nothing beautiful. "Who would be a champion for you?"

"I wouldn't mind."

At the ringing feminine voice, Tyrion swung his head around and up at the catwalk that ran along one side of the throne room. The Northern interlopers repurposed what was once used as a defense for archers or men with crossbows to protect the King and the royal family below.

The air shimmered, and then a young woman with curly brown hair appeared. She was dressed in black, and one boot was braced against the low wall of the catwalk. Her body was folded over the raised knee, an arm draped across it to counter her weight. She was grinning down at the court, but it was a nasty sort of grin, one that promised viciousness.

The winter witch, thought Tyrion, slightly hysterical at the thought of her being his champion. The enemy of my father is my friend, I suppose.

"Hello everyone," she said, with a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

As she spoke, the air along the catwalk shimmered like a mirage in a desert and revealed several armed and very, very angry Northerners.

Tyrion blinked and thought, oh shit.

Then everything went to hell.

TBC..
The grin on the Winter Witch's face was chilling. In the next moment, she launched from the balustrade and landed heavily on the marble flooring of the throne room with her knees bent and one hand pressed to the floor. The *thud* reverberated throughout the now silent chamber. From her hand on the floor, fingers spread; a spider web of white ice snaked out, crackling over the dented marble from her fall.

She slowly rose to her full height, her strange light brown eyes flashing as they surveyed the shock-still court.

"Did you miss us?" she asked.

Then -

Someone screamed, and Tyrion himself spun toward the sound but was unable to pinpoint it as someone else hollered loudly. There were several more thuds as the Northmen all dropped from the landing above the throne room, their heavy forms, and boots splitting the thick flooring.

*Magic,* thought Tyrion numbly, wide-eyed as the men shook off the drop and rose, swords out. *They should not have survived that drop, not without breaking their legs. They're aided by magic!*

The Witch thrust her hands out - a wooden wand in one, clutched in her closed fist and the other palm flat, hand extended - and the tiered seats on Tyrion's right - the furthest from the Witch and the Northerners - slid back with a burst of cold air. Those in the seats screamed and cried, clutching one another and the wood as it quickly skidded, slamming against the far wall. Some fell from the stands and others leaped out of its way. The entire room shook with the force of the hit.

"GUARDS! GUARDS!" His father was shouting, his voice heard above the noise of the room and the echo the high ceilings created. The clank of metal against metal cut through the panicked voices, some now sobbing in relief that Lannister guards and the City Watch were coming to their aid.

Tyrion pitied them for the thought. *This is not going to go well,* he thought grimly, twisting in his spot to face forward where his sham of a trial was now postponed. Loras was shepherding his sister to the far wall, where she had a determined jut to her chin and was already speaking calmly to a court lady.

His eyes swivelled toward his father on his raised dais, and Cersei, whose face was pale. Her
personal guard had surrounded her but she seemed rooted in the spot; both Mace Tyrell and Oberyn Martell were on their feet but without weapons, as they had not been permitted to bring any in. Neither looked panicked though.

The rest of the court had their eyes on the advancing enemy, leaving Tyrion to finally - finally - be off from the center of attention. And yet he was stuck, still clasped in irons. He yanked on the chains holding him in place in the prisoner's box, cursing under his breath.

It was hard to keep track of everything then.

The guards burst into the room from the doors - behind where Tommen had left, the large main doors - their swords already drawn and ready as they took stock of the scene. A few lit upon the Northerners and the Witch and charged.

Tyrion had his eyes on the curly-haired Witch, watching as she swept her wand-clad hand out and away from her body in an arc. The flames from the hanging chandeliers, the flames in the tall, thin floor candelabras, even the sconces on the walls, all flickered, like being slowly snuffed out. There was the barest trickle of light and then white-hot blue flames burst up and out from the candles, with a loud roar and whoosh of hot air that had people screaming again.

The flames grew in height until they reached the ceiling and then spread, licking down in winding tendrils along the columns and then spreading and winding along the cracks in the floor tiles until everyone in the room was encased in a square, bordered by the flames.

Instantly the temperature rose.

Tyrion jerked back instinctively, his chains rattling. Sweat beaded along his hairline and he nervously looked around the room.

One of the Northerners was clashing with a member of the City Watch near him; the man was tall and broad-shouldered, with brown hair bordering on blonde and already covered in blood as his jaw tensed and he slashed his way through the guards coming at him.

Tyrion ducked under the spray of a severed artery from a man near him.

When he peered up over the lip of his box, the man had moved on but in his place, the Witch stood, mopping up behind him.

Well, thought Tyrion sardonically, not quite.

When Cersei married Robert Baratheon and moved in the Red Keep, the two had spent thousands of gold dragons on removing the dragon statues and ornaments from the walls and window ledges, replacing them with stags and lions.

And the Witch was using that to her advantage, her magic yanking stag heads and lion statues from their places around the throne room, unhindered by her magical fire, straight towards her where she animated them. Golden lions leapt beyond the Witch's reach, silently snarling as they launched at a Lannister guard who stood frozen in horror, only to be mauled and pushed to the floor, screaming as the golden claws ripped into his throat.

Horror stole through Tyrion. This was the Witch's power? This was what Robb Stark had in his army?

"That doesn't look comfortable."
Tyrion tore his eyes from the mangled corpse of the Lannister guard and looked up. The curly-haired Witch stood before his prisoner's box, his light brown eyes boring into him. Tyrion found his mouth gaping and he struggled to say, "W-What?"

The Witch's eyes glanced down, and Tyrion followed them. They ended up on the shackles around his wrists keeping him tied to the box.

"Oh." Tyrion blinked, his mind still trying to process everything. He looked back up. "Er - no. They're not."

"Didn't think so," she replied and extended her hand with the wand in it toward him.

Panicked, Tyrion tried to shuffle backward but soon was as far as he could go, the very shackles they were talking about keeping him in place, despite being tautly stretched out, parallel to the wooden floor of his box.

There was an amused look in her eyes as she smartly tapped her wand on one of his wrist shackles. There was a click and then they fell to the floor with a clang that was lost in the sounds of the melee around them. Tyrion stared at his freed hands.

"You're welcome," the Witch said, and then spun away as if sensing something behind her. Tyrion watched in awe as she blocked a bolt from a crossbow, a solid encasement of white-blue ice forming around her forearm knocking the bolt of course with a mild chip.

The Witch caught the eyes of the man who fired the bolt at her, staring back in shock. Barely twenty feet from her, he swore, looking down and cranking back the mechanics as he tried to load another bolt quickly - but the Witch had no patience and flung her encased arm towards him, and the ice detached in razor-sharp bolts of her own that impaled the man. He jerked back and then fell to the floor in a heap.

The youngest Lannister swallowed thickly at the sight.

"WITCH!"

The title was roared across the room, and Tyrion's head twisted toward it - only to see his father furiously staring down at the young woman, a vein at his temple pulsing underneath the leather strap to his eye patch.

"How dare you!" he snarled, nearly spitting and frothing at the mouth as he spoke. Someone had given him a sword. "How dare you come here!"

But the Witch looked back impassively, like Tywin was a cockroach under her heel - and Tyrion certainly didn't blame her for such a look since he often wished he was brave enough to glare at his father in such a way. Then she lashed out, a tendril of sharp, icy water bursting from her wand like a whip as it crashed through the air, crackling and dodging around Northerners fighting while nicking Lannisters and City Watchmen at the same time.

Those hit by the water cried in shock, cuts instantly welling from the whip as it moved and weaved between them all, heading straight for Tywin.

The older Lannister dodged the whip, though, demonstrating a spryness that Tyrion didn't think he still had in him. He twisted and knelt, picking up a discarded shield, and used that to brace himself against the next lash.

Water hit and splashed against the metal, but it froze on contact. The man widened his remaining eye
as he glanced down at it, and then back at the Witch, striding forward with purpose to meet her.

And she was doing likewise, a hard look on her face. Glancing between the two, Tyrion was reminded of the saying 'caught between a rock and a hard place' but if someone were to ask him who was the rock and who was stuck - he wouldn't be able to answer.

This was nothing like the Battle for the Stone Mill, or even on the banks of the Trident by the Twins. This wasn't even like the skirmish as they systematically worked their way through the dark halls of the Twins to attack the Freys. This - Hermione found herself swearing as she ducked low in a crouch behind Edd - was a throwback to the Battle of Hogwarts.

It was chaos.

Upon stumbling to the tile, Hermione had her eyes on her target: Tywin Lannister. He escaped her once before, at Harrenhal, and by all accounts, he was the mastermind behind goading the Freys into making a move against Robb by playing on their insecurities and fear towards her. This man had gone to war for his sons - commendable - but also demonstrated no sense of morality or honour within his ranks.

Around her, Eddard and Umber were crashing into the Lannister guards with the force of a rogue bludger after Harry. Bolton was systematic in his cutting down of stragglers and around her, she could see the men she brought with her engaged in ferocious battles as they took out their rage on their chosen targets.

The civilians were a liability; they needed to be out of the way and a simple wind and banishment charm had the furthest and fullest stands from Tyrion's trial away, against the back wall. But keeping them from remaining alive and not casualties of war meant separating the crowd from the combatants - so Hermione turned her attention to the candles lining the room.

*Easy-peasy,* she thought, thinking *inflamarae,* and controlling the flames as they grew and she fed her magic into them, linking every candle and sconce. They flickered under her command as she drew more and more towards her and expelled the magic in one burst.

Eager to do her bidding, leaving Hermione a mite perturbed at the ease of her magic, the flames crept up and beyond, then licked down columns and crisscrossed the floor until the exits were blocked and no new guards could come in; no one could leave.

But the spectators, those of the court, they were beyond the flames. Through the light blue and white flames, another brown-haired person caught Hermione's eyes - briefly - and then she turned back to those she was leading out of the rooms, a curly-haired man at her side.

Almost absently, Hermione walked past Tyrion in the box, following in Edd's wake as he cut a swath through those engaging him. She remembered unlocking his cuffs, but that was it -

And then Tywin was screaming at her and her magic leaped to her fingertips and her blood roared in her ears and her wand was moving without conscious thought.

When he blocked the water whip, Hermione cut the spell and let her wand slide back into her holster; instead, she held her hands out before her, at waist height, palms a mere inch from one another as the air chilled between them under heavy condensation formed, swirling in a circular pattern. The condensation turned to snow, and then that snow to ice pellets, and then a solid, spinning disc between her hands. This all took mere seconds.

"Aargghhh!" Hermione shouted and thrust her hands out, letting the disc fly toward Tywin.
A Lannister guard stepped in front of the disc meant for him, and both watched as the man was neatly bisected, surprise etched on his face.

Tywin glanced up at her, and she at him, and then he was racing toward her, sword held high.

Hermione shifted to the side, bringing her hands up, still swirling with ice particles; she began slamming her closed fists at him in alternating pulses.

Ice burst from them, in thick rocks, and the man slashed his way through, swinging his sword right and left.

When he was upon her, Hermione dodged and the sword missed her. Instead, she swung around to his unprotected back and sent a banishing charm at him. Tywin stumbled forward, flying through the air and catching himself against the abandoned tiered stands that had been below the catwalk she and the Northerners had dropped down from. He wheezed hard against it but kept hold of his sword.

In the meantime, two more guards were on her and Hermione flung \textit{glacius} at one's feet, sending him tripping and sliding over the now icy slick floor. A well-aimed icicle thrown from Hermione's hand impaled him through the neck and he collapsed to the floor, bleeding red all over the ice.

The other two charged, and she took a few careful steps back as she tossed her ice pellets at them, catching one in the eyes through his visor. Blood trickled down from the cuts, impeding his vision further.

"Argh!" he cried, stumbling to a halt, bringing his hands up to claw and wipe at his face.

The other one made the mistake of glancing back before looking at her, and Hermione took the time to take the slick ice - which was melting from the first attack - and use it against him. Her arms spread up and wide as she did so, causing two large sheets of ice to rise like pillars on either side of the man.

With a grim look from her, and once of panicked understanding from him, Hermione slammed her hands together, clapping her palms loudly as they met. The ice sheets mimicked her and the man became trapped between the two, instantly crushing him under their weight and force.

Hermione swung her head around to face Tywin, who was glaring at her, but there was something evaluating in his remaining eye.

Silently, they observed each other.

Then, the man broke it. "So the Winter Witch is a title."

She shrugged. "One of many."

"And what else do they call you?" he asked, stepping forward and letting the tip of his sword just graze the floor as he did so. The soft \textit{shink} noise it made as it scraped the tile caused a shiver to dance down Hermione's spine. "Hmm? I do believe the name \textit{Hermione Granger} has been bandied about as well. Is that your name, witch?"

Sensing no need to continue to be coy, Hermione inclined her head. "It is."

"The Lady Granger," spoke Tywin but the tone was mocking. "You are from no noble family in Westeros."

"True," she replied, sidestepping and watching the man warily as they continued to move slowly.
She gathered her magic to her, and it spread over from her hands and up her arms, snow solidifying into ice as it grew colder the further up her arms it went, until the ice reached her shoulders over the black leather of her outfit.

"Then where are you from? The Free Cities? Ashaii? Further?"

Hermione flicked a hand and Tywin dodged the shard of ice. "Maybe when you guess correctly, I'll tell you."

Then Tywin moved, stepping toward within striking distance and Hermione used the magic gathered in her palms to create a long shard of ice that cracked against his blade. The sound was like a gunshot in the room, but her shard held.

"You moved against me from the very beginning," the elder Lannister hissed, his face close to hers. "Why? House Lannister did nothing to you."

"On the contrary," snapped Hermione, shoving against the man with her shard of ice, and then using her other hand to thrust against his chest with a spell - but he caught her wrist with his free hand and shoved it away, causing her to spin toward his blade. She ducked under it.

"The very first time I met someone from Westeros - I interrupted a fight between your son and Robb Stark. And when I said I wanted nothing to do with their fight, even turning my back and walking away, it was your son who decided to try to strike down an unarmed woman."

Tywin's blade rose up in the space where she stood, and Hermione jumped back, bringing her hands up in front of her and forming a large shield of ice. The blade cut into it, feeling resistance as Tywin swung it, but it gouged a long, thin line through, flaking off parts of the ice.

"You are hardly unarmed," commented Tywin, glancing at her shield.

"He didn't know that at the time," responded Hermione, narrowing her eyes and then banishing the ice shield at the man.

Tywin swore and flattened himself to the ground as the ice passed overhead, crashing into the raised steps of where he and the others sat during the trial. The top of the dais was blocked by the heat of the flames that still roared and hissed with strength at a man's height. He glanced back at the broken and chipped, thick pieces of ice that were slowly melting and easily envisioned that as his head.

Hermione stood before him, hair blowing back in an unfelt wind, her eyes glowing and matching the pulsing white of the snow in the palms of her hands and frost creeping up her wrists until it turned to ice.

"I would've walked away," the woman said, stepping forward confidently as Tywin looked up at her from the floor, "I would've left you alone had yours done the same. But he didn't - and here we are."

Frowning, Tywin stretched his hand out for his sword, grasping nothing but air and refusing to take his eyes off the threat in front of him. The melted ice pooled toward him until he was kneeling in a puddle, his sword beyond his reach and death looming in front.

"You think killing me will stop this war?" he asked instead, buying for time.

Hermione tilted her head to the side. "Won't it?"

Tywin sneered. "I am but one cog in the wheel, Granger. Killing me merely makes me a martyr to my family and House. You will prolong this through our allies, as they will continue my work. My
grandson is *king* and he will ensure it happens!"

As she raised her hands and the water beneath him began to harden, she said, "Well, then I suppose I'll just have to stop every single one of you, until this war is over - by leaving no one left alive."

She began to clench her hands and Tywin shivered, struggling to his feet as the water solidified into ice, holding him in place - he was going to die an ice statue to a young witch from the North - a mystical savage - and he grit his teeth at the idea of such an ignoble death -

Two soldiers in gold, the City Watch, flung themselves at Hermione and she felt her concentration break as they tackled her and she hit the floor.

*Where did they come from?* She thought, dazed.

Vaguely she heard someone scream her name, but she focused all her attention on the weight of the two men, one scrambling his armour-plated hand towards her neck, wrapping around it and squeezing while the other held her down, pressing hard against her stomach with his knee and winding her -

Hermione's eyes blazed amber and her magic *reacted* - sending the man off her in a blast of air so cold and so hard that he was frozen before he hit the floor, where his entire body shattered into glittering dust.

The other man swore and rolled out of the way, and made to swing his arm out to catch her as she slowly sat up, but Patrek was there, eyes blazing and his brown hair swept back and damp with sweat as he plunged his sword through the gap in the man's armour, between his neck and chest.

"What happened?" he demanded hotly, his eyes roaming over her form. He stretched out a hand to grab at her and hauled her to her feet. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," mumbled Hermione. "What's going on? Where's Tywin Lannister? I bloody had him-"

"Gone," muttered Patrek, eyes sweeping behind her and at the torn cloth in the half-frozen puddle, as well as blood.

Hermione let out a shriek of rage, fist clenched at her side as steam rose from them. Patrek eyed her warily, looking like he was contemplating taking a step back but then, breathing heavily, Edd appeared. His eyes were bright and wild and he was covered in blood and smelled terrible. "Time to go?"

Hermione took stock of their surroundings; Umber, Bolton, Karstark, and the Blackfish were slowly being driven back by what remained of the Lannister guard along with the City Watch, slowly closing the gaps between them as they formed a line, stepping closer and closer and back towards where they all began, toward Hermione, Patrek, and Edd.

There were countless bodies and parts littering the tiled floor, areas slick with blood, thickly red, and other areas pinkish where her use of water and ice diluted the blood. The court was gone; those who remained were the Northerners, and the guards.

Hermione nodded in agreement. "Time to go."

She turned to look back at where Tywin had been and fought against the desperate need to go after him; to hunt him down.

*Another day,* she told herself.
"Where's the Imp?" gasped Karstark as he appeared, ahead of the other three.

Hermione stared at him. "What am I, his keeper? How the hell am I supposed to know? I freed him and then he probably scampered off!"

"And got through the fire?" asked a dubious Patrek.

"His father did," argued Edd, a frown on his face.

"Never mind that!" snapped the Blackfish. "Let's PortKey out of here!"

Hermione agreed, and shouted, "WINTER IS COMING." The house sigil pins they all wore activated, and they were whisked away from King's Landing in a dizzying swirl of colours, landing hard in a crumpled heap in Winterfell, at the foot of a bewildered Sansa, stoic Sandor Clegane, and wide-eyed Arya in the predawn light as it crept over Winterfell's walls.

The aftermath of their attack in King's Landing left Hermione exhausted. Those who had joined her had begged off any debriefing from Arya until the morning, wearily walking to their rooms, covered in sweat, grime, and blood. Behind her, Wendyl and Donnel followed behind, wide-eyed and awake given that they did not join the others to King's Landing.

It was an all too familiar feeling for Hermione since arriving in Westeros. *I thought I left this behind when the war ended. But it doesn't ever seem to end*, she thought miserably, entering her chambers.

Even then, she had failed in seriously maiming - or killing - Tywin Lannister. The thought of him still alive left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Hermione pushed open the door to her quarters with wandless magic, sighing wearily as she did so. She immediately froze upon entering the room.

"Lady Hermione?" muttered Donnel behind her, but she waved him aside as she stared hard at a woman in a pink dress, who spun from where she stood at the side of Hermione's vanity. She was rearranging several perfumes and bottles of lotion that Hermione never used when Hermione entered the room. They were neatly arranged by height, and as Hermione glanced over at her writing desk, all her ink bottles were similarly organized.

In the pale light from the candles, Hermione narrowed her eyes. People rarely ventured into the room she took as her own at Winterfell, with the exception of Robb's guards and Arya. The curly light brown hair was familiar though, so she didn't slip her wand out.

"Who're you?"

"Lady Hermione!" the young woman gasped. "I wasn't sure when you'd return - Princess Sansa did not know what your plans were."

*Wait. I know that voice...* Hermione's eyes squinted. "... Barbara?"

Donnel sighed behind her and then took up a post at her door, with Wendyl's armour creaking as he too settled into his watch.

Barbara Bracken's smile wobbled a bit as her eyes glanced from Hermione's face to her hand - which Hermione realized was outstretched as if to ward an enemy off. She sheepishly let it fall to her side.

"Milady..." Barbara's voice wobbled a bit. "I hope you don't mind - Princess Sansa suggested that I could attend to you?"
Hermione squinted. "Attend to me…?"

Barbara nodded. "Like your Lady-in-Waiting…?"

*What?* Thought Hermione, staring hard at the other girl who met her gaze and held it, although she was clearly nervous. "I-

A knock on her door had Hermione turning her head slightly. Rickard Karstark stood just by the frame, outside of her room, but peering in; Donnel had a hand on his chest, preventing him from stepping further. Her guard glanced between the two young women and Karstark, and asked, "Lady Hermione, is this a bad time for Lord Karstark to speak with you?"

"I -" Hermione shook her head. "No. Barbara was just leaving." She turned back to the young woman in pink. "Thank you for your help, Barbara. Really - um - how about you come back later and we'll talk about this, okay?"

The woman nodded, eyes darting between her and Karstark. She bobbed a curtsey and then left the room through a different side door instead of the one in her receiving room. Weak rays of sunlight began to filter through the thick glass pane and Hermione breathed deeply as she undid her wand holster and tossed it onto a nearby chair.

The other man stepped into the room, a small shuffle, and kept the door open for propriety's sake, and due to the glare Donnel was levelling him.

"What do you want, Karstark?" she knew her tone was short, but she was tired, grimy, and lacked any patience. "I need to sleep, and I imagine you do, too. We also need to debrief Arya and Sansa shortly, and plan our next move against the Lannisters-"

"Why?"

Hermione startled at the question and slowly spun around to face the man whose son she had grown close to, and stared at him. "What do you mean, *why*?"

"Why do we need to plan our next move?" clarified Karstark, stepping further into the room. "We have a warded wall that blocks the Lannisters from coming through the Riverlands. We have plans to expand our shipping and we are focusing inward and preparing for winter. We don't need to look at things in the South right now."

"We don't need to look at things!" sputtered Hermione, her mouth dropping open. She snapped it shut.

Karstark nodded firmly. "Lady Hermione, the bold attacks at the Freys and King's Landing served us well for what they were - but now the Old Lion and King's Landing knows that we are well and still an organized threat."

"*Yes, exactly,*" broke in Hermione. "We're a threat, Karstark! And we should strike at them quickly - "

"We don't need to strike boldly and quickly. If we attack at all, it must be carefully," argued Karstark, frowning at her.

Hermione stared at him. "Carefully?"

He nodded. "And it can wait. Winter is coming, Lady Hermione. We should focus on that-"
"I'd like to think that revenge would be something to focus on!" replied Hermione, eyes flashing. "After what they've done-
"Not for revenge for King Robb. This is not what he would've wanted for us."

Hotly, Hermione felt her cheeks flush as she snapped, "I'm doing this for Robb! For what they did to him - to Sansa, and Arya, and Lady Catelyn, and his father! I'm continuing what he started!"

"What would you know what he would want or not?" asked Karstark, his own voice hard and frustrated as it rose to match her shrill tones. "You knew him only for a short period of time. You're not from this world - you don't know the Northern way!"

The words rang in the room, a heavy accusation that hit Hermione like a punch to her gut. By the door, both Donnel and Wendyl were looking in, Wendyl even laying a hand on the hilt of his sword as he took in the scene.

"My lady?" he prompted, glancing between the two.

A hot, wet sheen came to Hermione's eyes and she spun around so that her back was to Karstark. Through a tight throat, Hermione said, "It's fine, Wendyl. We're just having a chat."

Sensing that maybe he went too far, Karstark said, softly, "Hermione…"

"No," sniffed the young woman, bringing a hand up to her temple. "No, you're right, Lord Karstark. I'm not from Westeros. Or the North. I don't know your ways. I'm just the witch whose powers everyone is taking advantage of because I don't know any better - or I can't have any reason to want to protect people I care about."

"That's not -" frustration was rife in Karstark's voice.

"I think we're both tired and we've had a long night," she said, turning around once she was sure her face was composed. It was pale in the light. "Let's have a meeting for lunch with the others, shall we? A few hours sleep will do us all good."

At the finality in her tone, the hard look in her eyes, and the glares of the two guards by her door, Karstark nodded silently, bowing to her and then leaving the room.

When Donnel looked like he was going to speak, Hermione cut him off with a brusque, "Don't," and he firmly pressed his lips into a line but went to shut her door. Once it was closed, an angry wave of Hermione's hand had the bolt slide into place, ensuring her privacy.

A moment later, she rose a privacy ward with muffliato tied into it, strode toward the perfume bottles Barbara had nicely lined up, and in a fit of anger, swept them all off the vanity, sending them crashing to the floor as shards of glass flew everywhere.

Robb looked between Luna and Flitwick skeptically. "Dreamwalking?"

The two Ravenclaws shared a look before turning back to Robb with a rather serious expression on their faces. Well, Luna's at least; for a jovial man, Flitwick could look serious at times, too.

This time, the young King was with the two Ravenclaws in the study. Harry was off at work for a change, and the two decided to visit Grimmauld Place with the unconventional idea since the parchment and mirror had failed to work.
"It is your world," answered Flitwick in a roundabout manner. "You should be able to connect to something there better with your consciousness than with an object as the focal point."

"But..." Robb glanced at them again in confusion. "How?"

"Well, traditionally, there are many different methods," began Flitwick, his voice slipping into a lecturing tone, "Including some basic Occlumency that would help—"

"But we don't have the time for that," interjected Luna. Her wide eyes were solemn and there was something missing from her usual oddness as she regarded Robb and Professor Flitwick. "To become an Occlumency master would take years if not decades. We're going to try a blunt-force version."

Robb swallowed thickly. "Blunt force?"

Flitwick reached over and patted him on the hand, in what he thought was a reassuring way. "Oh, nothing to fear, Your Highness. It's just a few potions to calm and relax you, and then another to help open your 'inner eye.'"

A snort had Robb turn, his eyes wide in slight panic as they met the stormy blue of Ron Weasley. The tall, lanky young man was leaning against the frame of the door to the study, his arms crossed and his mouth pressed into a terse line. "What they haven't told you is that they're using the information from a highly reputable source."

"How is that bad?" asked Robb, turning back to Luna and Flitwick; Luna, in response, scowled at Ron while Flitwick plastered a delicate look on his face.

"Ah – what Mr. Weasley is referencing – I believe – has to, oh dear—"

"He means Professor Trelawney."

Robb glanced between the three, at Luna, who was staring hard at Ron; at Flitwick, who was fidgeting and trying to look away as to not answer; and at Ron himself, who met Luna's eyes unrepentantly. "Who is Professor Trelawney?"

"Oh, just some hack of a Divination professor," replied Ron breezily. "No worries there, yeah, mate? I mean, it's not like her predictions really came true."

"She gave two true prophecies," argued Luna, eyes narrowing. "And Professor Firenze will be helping, as well."

"Yeah," laughed Ron a bit darkly, "An old fraud who is more liquored up than sober and a centaur who speaks in riddles and was exiled from his own kind. They'll really help His Highness."

With that said, Ron rolled off the frame and disappeared back into the gloom of Grimmauld Place, leaving Robb behind with a frustrated Luna and mildly disappointed Flitwick. The young King took a deep breath and then rose from his seat, muttering a terse, "excuse me," to them, as he left the room.

Just outside the door, he paused, glancing left and right, as he tried to figure out what direction Ron went. This conversation was long overdue.

Taking a gamble on what he knew of Ron from Harry and Hermione's stories, he headed for the kitchen. It was a familiar place for Robb, but it was also a place that he knew Ron felt comfortable. The hearth was a meeting place and a place for warmth and comfort, and he hoped that the room
could mimic the unspoken rules of Guest Rights in his world.

True to form, Ron was hunched over the island, his head in his hands as he ran his long fingers through his rakish red hair, mussing it up. The man seemed tense, or tired, but so was Robb.

Clearing his throat, he watched as Ron’s form stiffened. "May I come in?"

"Why not?" muttered Ron. "You've taken over everywhere else, so why not here, too?"

Undeterred, Robb slid around the island and leaned against the far counters as he stared down the tired-looking redhead. Unless he was missing something completely off the mark, he did not understand why Ron had taken such an intense dislike to him – and he was curious, and annoyed enough now, to want to find out.

Calmly, Robb took a deep breath and asked, "Why do you hate me?"

Ron's head popped up. His eyes were wide and a bit wild, but the man frowned and said, "I don't hate you."

"Really? Because you have a funny way of showing that you like me," replied Robb quietly. "From the moment I arrived, you have done everything in your power to undermine any actions people were doing to help me return home. It's like you don't want me to leave."

Ron snorted. "Oh, trust me, I want you to leave."

Robb's frown deepened.

Ron caught the look. "Forgive me if I don't believe you."

"Look, Your Most Worshipfulness," the other man sneered, leaning back on his seat, "I don't like you. I don't want you here. That's never been the problem."

"Then what is?" asked Robb, tilting his head to the side.

"I don't trust you," replied Ron smartly, standing from his stool. "I don't trust you, and I don't trust that you've told us everything. And while I can't prove it, I'm sure you are doing something that is stopping everyone from finding a way home for you."

Robb felt his frustration bubble up. "All I want to do is go home! I have duties there——"

"Oh, yes, we know," drawled the redhead Weasley. He rolled his eyes. "We've all heard it – oh look at me, the poor King who lost his kingdom. Oh, woe is me, the young man who needs a witch to win his war because he isn't strong enough or good enough. Well, guess what, mate?! Ron finished on a shout, breathing heavily, "You can't have her."


Ron clamped his mouth shut, and the two men stared at each other for a long, silent minute, until another terse voice broke through the air.

"Ron."

The two spun to see Harry standing in the doorway to the kitchen, emerald eyes narrowed and flashing angrily.

"Harry——"
"Robb, can you excuse us, please?" the other, shorter man asked, but there was a hint of steel in his voice that meant it was a command.

Recognizing the order from one commander to another, Robb nodded and edged his way around the island and then around Harry as he stepped further into the kitchen. Robb walked up the basement steps, and then stopped in the hallway, just out of sight from the kitchen.

"—what do you want me to say, huh?" asked Ron, his voice tinged with desperation and anger. "That I'm wrong? That I should trust him? Please. He's hiding something – I just don't know what!"

"Ron..."

"Are you going to say I'm paranoid, Harry? Really, you?"

"You're not even going to try to give him the benefit of the doubt?" asked Harry quietly. "Like I've been doing? I believe he's telling the truth."

"Excuse me, but I have given loads of people the benefit of any doubt," retorted Ron, "Or do you need a reminder of sixth year and the Draco Malfoy incident? Because I do believe it was you in my position."

Harry sighed. "Why can't you trust him, Ron?"

"Because you trust everyone now, Harry!" the shout made Robb flinch and he jerked a bit away from the wall from where he was eavesdropping.

"I—"

"Yeah, didn't think you'd hear that, huh? But it's true! Ever since the war ended, you're always helping people, wanting to believe the best in them or smiling and saying 'yessir' to Kingsley or the Ministry! You were once the moodiest twat I'd ever known and now this guy just pops out of a portal and you believe him?"

"How can I not? He knows where Hermione is! He was injured! He had no knowledge of this place and things only we knew! He'd only know that if Hermione told him."

"Yeah," replied Ron tartly. "Like under torture."

Robb sucked in an insulted breath.

"Ron—" wheezed Harry, shocked. "Hermione withstood Bellatrix LeStrange. Do you really think she'd break in another world? One where there isn't magic or any magical means to constrain her?"

There was the sound of a shuffle, and then Ron sighing. "I don't know, Harry. I don't know except that twice, I didn't put my faith in you and Hermione. The first time, I didn't believe you and you nearly died. The second time, I left you both and you nearly died again. Bad things happen when we're split up. We're meant to be a team – you, me, Hermione."

"... Helping Robb get home doesn't mean that the portal will close, Ron," said Harry finally, his voice tinged with infinite patience and gentleness. "In fact, we'll have more information and know more about it."

There was a long, pained moment, and then Ron whispered (but it was achingly loud to the three men), "But what if she doesn't want to come back? What then?"
Robb closed his eyes. He had heard enough, but he couldn't find it in himself to move.

"Then she stays in Westeros, Ron," answered Harry quietly, "And we learn to be happy for her. After everything she gave up for me, I would never take that away from her."

After a few moments of silence, Harry said, "I'm going to get Robb and we're going to Hogwarts. It'll be best if he stays there, I think, where the two of you won't be in the same room unless it's at a brainstorming session."

"Yeah, probably," muttered Ron.

"If Hermione stays, Ron, it might not be because of him."

"Or it might entirely be because of him."

"Stuff it," snapped Harry. "You've always done this, with anyone who takes an interest in her, and you don't have a leg to stand on. Drop it."

"Fine," the other man mulishly replied.

"Ron," warned Harry, "I mean it. You don't even feel that way about her – you've known that since the Battle."

"I said fine."

Harry sighed and then Robb felt his throat close up as the man emerged from the basement kitchen. He closed the door behind him with a tiny sigh. He looked tired, but his eyes lit on Robb quickly and then closed in mortification. "How long have you been there?"

"Since I left," he admitted.

Harry swore under his breath, rubbing a hand over his mouth. His eyes darted back at the kitchen, but with the door closed, Ron couldn't hear them.

"I – I want to apologise –"

Robb shook his head.

"No, really, I need to," continued Harry, adamant. "It's always been the three of us – through everything – and it's... it's been harder for Ron to realize that we're moving on. But that's not – that shouldn't excuse him—"

Robb shook his head again, reminded of Jon's jealousy and bitterness toward Theon; while it wasn't the same, there were enough similarities. "It's fine."

Harry sighed. "C'mon, let's get you to Hogwarts. I'll have Kreacher bring your stuff after."

Robb nodded and followed behind until they stood on the stoop outside; he endured the awful feeling of Apparation and then the walk up to Hogwarts. This time, the night was falling and he had the pleasure of seeing the castle lit up with thousands of candles that gleamed across the inky black of the Black Lake and matched the twinkling stars that were emerging as the sun fell behind the mountain range in the distance.

Then he found himself in a guest room, the entire walk up and through the hallways gone from his mind, and Madam Pomfrey was there, handing him one strange-looking bottle after another. On one side was a woman with wild blonde-ish hair behind thick spectacles to help her sight, and on the
other, was a half-man, half-horse, with a blank expression as he stared at Robb.

Robb downed the bottles in the order that Pomfrey gave him, while the wild-haired woman muttered about "the inner eye is clouded and murky," and the man – the centaur? – hummed thoughtfully. He would never get used to magic, he decided.

"And then just this one, Your Highness," the matron finished, collecting the empty bottles.

Robb gulped the deep blue liquid down. Harry, hovering behind everyone, frowned as he glanced between the bottle, Robb, and the Divination professors.

"That'll just help him ease into a deep sleep, right?" the black-haired man fretted. "He won't have hallucinations or something, right?"

Robb grimaced at the idea.

"Not at all, dear," replied Pomfrey, patting Robb's hand. She bustled away, her collection of bottles floating behind her as they clinked and ended up elsewhere in the infirmary.

The wide-eyed Divination professor peered at him from behind the glass of her spectacles. "My dear," she began, her voice airy and light, "Do not be afraid to follow the directions you will see and experience."

"I – er... of course," said Robb, glancing nervously at Harry as he felt the first dregs of drowsiness creep into his eyes.

"Oft the way is dark before one sees the light," the woman continued.

At her other side, Harry muffled a snort of laughter.

Robb eased down on the bed, his head comforted by the pillow. As his eyelids pulled down, he found himself slowly drifting into the encroaching blackness of unconsciousness.

"Listen to the wisdom of your Gods, Robb Stark," a deep, male voice rumbled. It took him a few moments to realize it was the centaur – the only one who hadn't yet spoken – but then he slipped into the darkness and floated there several long, agonizing moments.

In that darkness, eventually a pinprick of light appeared, and then he whirled, reminded of his dream from long ago when he met his siblings and walked with Sansa through the garden in King’s Landing. Where was she now? Had Hermione and the others retrieved her? Was Arya safe in Winterfell?

The pinpricks of light turned into softly falling snow and then soon he was standing in a familiar Godswood – his thoughts of Arya at Winterfell brought him to his childhood home.

He peered up at the white bark of the weirwood tree before him, his eyes following the trunk up until he paused on the weeping face. The red sap streaked down and made a morbid grimace, etched into the tree that was as familiar as his own reflection. The red leaves of the weirwood remained on the limbs, despite the chill in the air and the snow on the ground.

*Thanks for bringing me here,* he thought at the tree, and he could've sword the branches moved and the leaves rustled in reply. Shaking his head, and narrowing his eyes thoughtfully, Robb turned and began a familiar trek toward Winterfell. When he reached the inner courtyard, he soon made out the shapes of familiar, and unfamiliar, people moving about.
Mouth agape, he could only stare as he took hesitant steps forward every time he saw someone he knew – there was the Greatjon, mouth moving wordlessly as he instructed his guards to offload something. Further, both Bracken and Blackwood, clearly working together in ways they previously never had, were helping alongside a few others in lifting heavy planks of wood onto several carts.

There was no sound – just the rushing of his blood in his ears – but Robb got the feeling that things were progressing, moving forward with purpose as people strode to and fro, shouting or ordering people to move faster, to gather things or move them from one place to the next as carts rolled into empty and left full.

Then, a tingle of awareness low in his stomach had him turn to face the main doors that led to Winterfell proper, underneath a covered walkway. His heartbeat quickened and his mouth went dry at the sight that greeted him.

Hermione was in all black, the leather outfit only somewhat similar to the dress she wore when he last saw her at the Twins; but there was a solid grey cloak trimmed with white fur around her shoulders, the edges flapping out in the breeze as she walked forward. At her side, lowly discussing something with her was Roose Bolton, his cool grey eyes never faltering in their roving action as they took in the busy courtyard.

Hermione herself was nodding along to what the man was saying, her eyes surveying the people. Behind her, Robb was pleased to see Lucas and Patrek, their own eyes and stance watchful, even within the protective walls of Winterfell. But where was Torrhen? Dacey?

Robb frowned and stepped forward; his feet made no dent, no noise on the fallen snow. He was feet away when Hermione twitched, her eyes moving right toward him. His breath caught.

Can you feel me? Hermione?

Her eyes narrowed and Patrek's entire form stiffened as he too turned in the direction she was looking, but his eyes skipped past where Robb stood, looking beyond. Hermione, however, had her amber-coloured eyes darting around him, but always just sliding off like she couldn't quite place where she should be looking.

Lucas's mouth moved and Robb read the words he formed: Milady?

But Hermione shook her head, furrowed her brow and turned away so that he couldn't see what response she made to him. They began moving, Patrek still glancing warily around, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Hermione! Robb shouted after her. Wait! Don't go!

But then the snow was swirling, and fading to grey, then black – and then he woke with a loud gasp, jackknifing up from the bed and nearly colliding with Harry, who was leaning over him.

"Whoa!" the other man gasped, reeling back onto his feet and putting some space between them. "Robb? What happened?"

The young king turned wild eyes on Harry, reaching forward as he swung his legs out from under the covers tucked around him and grabbed at Harry's sweater.

"Harry!" he grinned. "I saw her!"

Harry's own eyes brightened. "Hermione!" he asked, pleased.

Robb nodded. "Whatever this was, it worked! I appeared at the weirwood tree in the Godswood, in
Winterfell!

A slow, answering smile stretched across Harry’s face. "Did you see her? Did you tell her we're looking for a way to bring you home?"

Robb's smile faltered a bit. "She – ah – they couldn't hear or see me."

Harry's smile slipped right off. "But... but you were there?"

"Yes." Robb nodded.

A grim look settled on Harry, but it was also one of determination. "Then it's more than we've had before, and something to work on." He glanced around the infirmary, and shouted, "Madam Pomfrey! Madam Pomfrey!"

Robb winced at the loudness, but it didn't stop the elation from spreading further through his body, all centered at his heart. Finally, he thought, progress. Hang on, Hermione. I'll be there soon.

---

Hours later, Barbara woke Hermione with a gentle shake on her shoulder. The young witch had collapsed on top of the bed covers, having exhausted herself and her magic not just with the attack at King’s Landing, but also her temper tantrum upon her return.

"Lady Hermione," the other young woman whispered, "You should get ready. It's nearly noon."

"Mmm," moaned Hermione into her pillow, but she obligingly rolled over and then sat up, rubbing at her tired eyes.

"I have a bath ready for you," continued Barbara, speaking in a calming, gentle voice, "And some cheese and bread for you to snack on before the council meets. Also…” she trailed off, making Hermione look at her.

"You look nervous. What is it?" she asked, yawning and stretching her arms above her head.

"You should know, milady," began Barbara haltingly, "We received a raven. Queen Cersei is dead."

Hermione blinked, twisting her head toward Barbara. Her neck and back cracked and popped as she did so. "What?"

Barbara nodded. "It was sent by Tywin Lannister - although it bears King Tommen's seal and signature. He claims that his youngest son, Tyrion, murdered the Queen with the aid of you, Lady Hermione, and your magic. He’s called for your arrest."

Hermione snorted and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. "Good luck getting that proven! Ha." She frowned thoughtfully. "So Tyrion killed his sister…” Her eyes slanted to Barbara. "Do you know if anyone's told Jaime yet?"

Barbara shook her head. "I only know because Maester Cannion brought the letter to Princess Arya's attention and she was with Princess Sansa and me when he did so."

"What does Arya want to do with this information?" asked Hermione.

Barbara shook her head. "I don't know, milady."

Hermione sighed, running a hand through her tangled curls and gently disentangled them when they became caught. "Okay. Well - I'll assume she'll bring it up in the meeting soon. I'll deal with it then."
"Of course, Lady Hermione," replied Barbara.

Later, Hermione was nibbling on the bread and cheese while Barbara tried to do something with her hair (after years of living with Lavender and Parvati, Hermione knew it was a lost cause), and then was quickly dressing while using an Ever-Fresh Mint charm on her mouth. Then, she was out her door with Daryn following her, having experienced a shift change.

Her silent guard caught the figure that emerged from one of the long, winding halls before Hermione did; she was preoccupied in her mind with what the meeting would entail and how it would go - would the Lords crow about the fact that Cersei Lannister was dead? That only Tommen, Myrcella, and Tywin remained 'at large' while Jaime was in their care; and Tyrion missing?

"Lady Hermione."

Hermione blinked and her steps slowed as the lithe figure of Lyra Mormont fell into step beside her. The girl was wearing her usual battle gear, softened brown leather threaded through with the colours of House Mormont. Her chin-length cropped hair framed her face and made her blue eyes rounder than they actually were - but did nothing to hide the anger in them.

"Lyra," began Hermione cautiously. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to know why I wasn't invited to the gathering last night," the young woman asked tersely. Her square jaw worked in her anger as she held back whatever rage was building, exercising it only in her sharp steps, and flashing eyes.

"To King's Landing?" confirmed Hermione, narrowing her eyes. "I only asked those I knew well - and those I had fought with before - to attend."

"That's not true," the girl protested, a hand cutting through the air to emphasize her point. "You brought the Hound along! Since when have you fought with him?"

"He saved my life once," answered Hermione, her own answer clipped and short. I don't owe you any explanations! "Is that all?"

An annoyed huff of air indicated that Hermione's answers weren't good enough for Lyra, but the eldest Mormont at Winterfell stopped walking, letting Hermione and Daryn pass unmolested.

"Maybe you just don't trust women to watch your back, Lady Hermione!" the girl shouted behind her. "Or you just don't like women standing by your side - that you prefer the men around you only because they do better? Is that why my sister Dacey is no longer here? Did you leave her behind to die? Is that my punishment? That I can't prove myself worthy in a battle?"

Hermione's entire being froze. The very air around her chilled, until her breath and Daryn's were coming out in tiny, white puffs of air that crystallized and froze. Around her feet, frost snaked out and stiffened the edges of the tapestries hanging on the walls beside them.

"You - You think - you think that I left Dacey behind?" sputtered Hermione, torn between incredulity, guilt, and anger as she spun to face Lyra. The other girls' face of flushed pride in guessing the correct answer quickly fell into worried concern and fear as she took in Hermione's face visage and the crackling around her as her fingertips turned blue.

Lyra swallowed and shored up her courage. "Did you not? Else, where is she?"

"I-I don't know."
"You don't know?" repeated Lyra, taking a daring step forward just as Hermione faltered and the air began to warm. "I heard you used dark blood magic to locate the King's erstwhile family members. Why can't you do the same for me?"

"It's not dark magic," muttered Hermione under her breath, rolling her eyes.

In the meantime, to prove her point, Lyra procured one of her ever-present throwing knives and held it against her hand, ready to slash it open. "How much do you need?"

"NO!" Hermione took a step forward, stretching out. Her magic responded instinctively, and the knife went flying from Lyra's hand until it embedded itself in the far wall.

Fury overtook Lyra's face. "Oh - so it's good enough for the King you love but not good enough for-
"

"That's not it!" shouted Hermione, screwing her eyes up tight and balling her hands by her side. "That's not it at all!"

Lyra's face shifted to something blank.

Hermione sighed, her anger draining from her. "Merlin, how could you-? I can't believe -" she shook her head. "You know why I haven't done the spell? Because I'm afraid, okay?!"

Lyra rocked back on her heels a bit. "Afraid? Of what"

"Of knowing the truth," whispered Hermione, turning away and hugging her arms to herself. Warily, Daryn took a step closer, but there was an expression to his face that clearly indicated that he didn't know how to protect her from this. "Of knowing if she's alive or dead. If she's dead - after what happened at the Twins - I couldn't-"

"She would've died doing her duty," interjected Lyra, but her tone was much softened.

"Protecting me on her King's orders when she didn't want," scoffed Hermione, sniffing. "How do you think I'd feel? Knowing that I didn't just lose T-Torrhen that night, but Dacey as well?"

Spying Lyra's look, Hermione cut her off with a sharp, "I know it was her duty, but it doesn't change the fact that it was because she was protecting me - she was there to make sure I survived. I could use all the magic in the world but it wouldn't bring back the dead."

The fire in Lyra's blue eyes went out, and they clouded with misery and acknowledgment. Hermione stared at her a moment longing - hoping it conveyed all the feelings she had regarding Dacey and her fears - before turning on her heel and moving forward again, this time with Daryn hovering much closer.

Before she took more than ten steps though, Lyra called after her, "Dacey did her duty, and House Mormont will always do so. If her last orders were to protect you, then I will do so, too. So the next time you're going off on a late-night adventure, Lady Hermione - you'd better bring me along, too! Because Here We Stand!"

Swallowing, Hermione kept walking, refusing to acknowledge the final, shouted words. Instead, she let her thoughts turn inward, self-doubt, recriminations on the heels of Karstark's words from earlier building in her.

A whine had her glance partially down, only to stare in shock as Grey Wind sidled up to her side. The giant wolf had only grown larger since their return to Winterfell, often hunting beyond the walls.
in the Wolfswood. At present, he was clean; his fur thick and smelling of pine and freshness that she associated with chilled winter air. He came up to her shoulders, nudging her gently for him - but it was enough to rock her a bit.

It startled a laugh out of her. She gripped the thick fur around Grey Wind's neck, scratching and threading her fingers through it as his tongue lolled out, and happy snuffs escaped the wolf.

"Thanks, Grey Wind," she whispered, and the wolf nudged her back, silently conveyed his support. The two strode into the council room together, Daryn sliding in to stand behind her chair.

Grey Wind, however, beat him to it and sprawled behind. Despite the lazy pose, the wolf's size had his reclining form still reach the table's height. The wolf yawned, a large gaping hole with sharp teeth and a soft sound leaving his snout before he snuffled and pillowed his massive head on his front legs.

The meeting itself began promptly once everyone arrived, in small bursts of twos and threes, and then Arya was leading the conversation but Hermione could not pay attention. Instead, her mind was transported back to her argument with Karstark, his ringing words of you don't know the Northern way repeating on a loop, each time a different word stressed with a different meaning:

You don't know the Northern way - it implied it was something she could learn.

You don't know the Northern way - she wasn't one of them.

You don't know the Northern way - she was doing something, but she wasn't doing it the way they wanted, which was their way.

And then, worst of all, was with all emphasis: you don't know the Northern way, and you never will silently attached at the end and everything she did was for naught because she was, once again, an outcast, an outsider, not good enough for these people despite being better, stronger, faster than them.

And after everything she had gone through - had done - with Torrhen. His death was still a painfully open wound on her heart, and she knew that despite knowing him such a short time, it was akin to losing Remus or Sirius. Lyra's accusations regarding Dacey only opened that wound further. Her hand tightened in Grey Wind's fur and every so often, the wolf would lean his head up to lick at her hand, draped over the edge of her seat.

She was so lost in her own head and thoughts that she failed to recognize Arya's worried looks, or even Sansa's confused ones - now that she had joined their council - and even the mildly guilty ones Karstark sent her way.

The absence of Hermione's voice at the meeting, while not deliberate, was acutely felt by everyone else who had come to rely on, and recognize, Hermione's words at their meetings. (Had she not been so involved in her own mind and doubts, Hermione would've realized that she had a place with these men and women and that she was valued.)

"... Hermione?"

Hermione blinked and looked up at Arya's tentative query. "Hmm?"

The relief on the young girl's face made Hermione realize that she had tried to get her attention for some time. "I was wondering what your thoughts are regarding the information we received."

"Sorry," Hermione blushed, glancing down. "I was lost in my thoughts. Which information?"
"What we will do with our prisoners," someone helpfully said from around the table. "Especially now with the Lion Queen’s death."

*Lion Queen, ugh,* thought Hermione but as she glanced around, she realized that silly monikers like that were the norm - hell, she was even recognized as the Winter Witch! With a sigh, Hermione said, "We should tell Jaime Lannister what happened. It was his sister; he deserves to know."

There were grumbles around the room, but Hermione shored up her glare and gave her best Ron-you're-a-dithering-idiot look to them and said, "One of my friends back home had a twin, and when his brother died in our war, George nearly lost himself because he was so overcome with grief."

"But it's the *Kingslayer,*" someone moaned.

Hermione shrugged. "And he's human. He feels emotion, he has emotions. Don't deny him that."

There were some muted mumbles, but Sansa peered at Hermione and asked, "Do you want to tell him, Lady Hermione?"

The image Sansa presented, of a demure young woman in a pretty dress peering intently at Hermione was slightly offset by the hulking figure of Clegane as he stood in silent vigil behind, sharing a competing space with the equally large Brienne, who was cutting the tall man some serious side-eye.

"Erm…" Hermione glanced around.

"You'd probably be the nicest about it," sighed Umber eventually, although it was more of a grumble.

"Cersei Lannister's death is a blow to the Lannisters," added Lord Forrester. He was rubbing his beardless chin thoughtfully. "We do have his son, and this could be used to bring the Kingslayer on our side."

*That* erupted into a conversation about why they would need such a man - but Hermione finally sighed loudly enough and pitched her voice so that it carried throughout the room without the charms. "How about I speak to him, and use his emotional instability to pressure him to answer some questions that we've all wanted to know the answers to."

"Like why he killed King Aerys?"

"What happened to Prince Bran?"

"What his thoughts *truly* were about his sister?"

The last one elicited crude laughter, causing Hermione to roll her eyes. "Sure, why not? I'll disillusion and silence everyone in the room. We'll use a parchment to communicate questions to me, and he won't even know everyone is here."

"Brilliant idea," enthused Manderly, his numerous chins wriggling as he nodded. "Absolutely brilliant."

Doing her best not to close her eyes in complete and utter annoyance, Hermione instead concentrated on the spell work she wanted to do, encompassing the entire room and table as a guard went to retrieve Jaime Lannister. There was the tell-tale shimmer of the Disillusion charm settling, and unless someone knew what they were looking for, it would be a mere haze or speckle of dust motes in the air to the untrained eye. She left Grey Wind free from the spell as a reminder to Jaime Lannister that the wolf was still around, but also as a sign of the power of the Starks and their allies.
A wide-spreading muffliato helped to keep conversations private, and a layered silencing charm on top muted those, like Umber, who couldn't whisper to save their life. Hermione found herself drumming her fingers on the thick top of their circular table, growing impatient as she waited. She glanced down at her parchment, still linked to so many others, and saw to her dismay that a few had taken to scratching doodles and jokes - most at the Lannister's expense - around a few legitimate questions.

It seemed that, in meetings, people were the same everywhere.

The doors to the room opened, opposite to where Hermione sat. Her head popped up and she watched as the gaunt prisoner cautiously stepped into the room. Habits were hard to break, so his eyes roved the (seemingly) empty space, looking from the chairs and the distance Hermione kept from him, to the windows as potential escape routes.

"They're spelled as not to break," she said, breaking the silence.

Jaime startled, but then a grim line was formed by his lips and he attempted a bit of a cocky strut as his guards let go of his arms. He did violently shake them off as he walked, trying to regain some control, but it was marred by the hollow look in his eyes and the way he consciously kept his right arm behind him, never to see the stump swing forward. His eyes finally rested on Grey Wind and he warily kept his distance.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" his voice was a low rasp, hoarse from disuse, but the tone was defiant.

"Just to let you know what's going on in the world," replied Hermione. She let her magic inch one of the empty chairs out - from a Lord who hadn't attended the session that afternoon - as a clear invitation. Still, it startled Jaime when she added, "Please. Sit."

He eyed the chair and gingerly sat in it, on the very edge if he needed to make a quick escape. Hermione watched him carefully, looking at the way his remaining hand trembled and then clenched into a fist on his thigh, the way he wanted to jiggle his leg.

"There was a mission last night," she began.

"Oh?" he asked, leaning back slightly and feigning disinterest by looking towards the door, the far wall - anywhere but her or Grey Wind. "What do I care?"

"It was on King's Landing."

This time, his eyes darted over to her, wide. There was an aborted motion with his mouth like he wanted to ask something, but then his jaw clenched and he kept quiet.

Knowing what she was about to say was going to shock him; Hermione began, gently, "We interrupted Tyrion's trial. It wasn't going very well for him-"

The tense jaw moved slightly, but Jaime was pointedly looking forward, lost in his own thoughts despite listening.

"-so we decided to engage your father and the guards in battle."

Jaime's blue eyes moved back to Hermione's, a silent question in them. She shook her head. "I freed your brother from where he was chained in his box, but I lost sight of him during the fight. I had your father at one point before I was..." she trailed off and grimaced. "Let's say, interrupted."
Jaime heaved a silent sigh of relief at his brother and father's fate. But when Hermione didn't continue, he croaked, "and my sister?"

"I'm sorry-" began Hermione but Jaime turned the colour of sour milk, swaying in his seat. Hermione continued, speaking a bit louder: "We found out this morning, via raven. Your father is claiming that Tyrion killed her."

The man's eyes flashed angrily, and he whirled to face Hermione. "No! That's not true! I don't believe it! Tyrion would never-"

But he stopped himself, mid-word, and then wilted - like something in his broke as he came to the realization that his family didn't quite care for one another the way that he wished they would. He slumped, his shoulders rolling inward and Hermione watched as the already broken man broke just a bit more.

"I'm sorry," she repeated quietly.

Tears gathered behind the man's eyes and he rubbed at him roughly with his left hand, swallowing thickly and turning his head away from Hermione so she couldn't see how badly he was affected. Inwardly, she winced at the thought, knowing he was directly facing Karstark and a few of the others whose lives he had affected the most during the Lannister-Stark war. Even Grey Wind seemed to be watching the man thoughtfully.

*That won't go well,* she thought, glancing down at the parchment to see if anyone wrote anything.

*Push him,* wrote Umber, and Hermione wanted to reach out and strangle the man.

She cleared her throat, giving Jaime some time to compose himself, and then asked, "How are you doing otherwise, Jaime? Are your accommodations well?"

"What do you care?" he snarled, all wounded pride and grief.

Hermione eased back in her chair a bit as she surveyed him, holding his angry gaze. He dropped his eyes first. "Well, where I come from, we have this thing called the Geneva Convention where prisoners of war are expected to be treated with dignity and some respect. You might be our prisoner - for the foreseeable future - but I'd like to ensure you're at least somewhat comfortable."

The man snorted. "Ha! That's more than we'd have ever given you if you were caught."

"I figured."

He shook his head, a tiny huff escaping his mouth. He took a few moments, but then he muttered, "What are you going to do with me? Will I remain in Winterfell?" He glanced at her, something tight in his face when he continued, "I won't regain my honour this way."

"Regain your honour?" repeated Hermione curiously. There were a bunch of questions about that popping up on her paper.

Jaime, absently, nodded, and began to pick at his threadbare trousers with his hand. "Lady Stark let me go with that monster of a woman to bring her daughters back to her."

"Lady Stark let me go with that monster of a woman to bring her daughters back to her."

"Regain your honour?" repeated Hermione curiously. There were a bunch of questions about that popping up on her paper.

Jaime, absently, nodded, and began to pick at his threadbare trousers with his hand. "Lady Stark let me go with that monster of a woman to bring her daughters back to her."

"Where is she? Lady Stark?"

Hermione's mouth pursed and she answered, tersely, "Not here. And what do you mean, bring Sansa and Arya back?"
"Like I said, witch," muttered Jaime, a hint of his arrogance and fire back in his minor bite. "I was to find the girls and return them. Lady Stark considered that my payment for the deeds done against her family." He looked around. "If - If I can't go and do that… what purpose do I have?"

*You can tell him I was recovered*, wrote Sansa in the nicest, primmest handwriting Hermione had ever seen. She looked up from her paper and sighed. "Well, even if we did release you, you wouldn't have to go far to find Sansa or Arya."

Jaime's head jerked up.

"They're here in Winterfell," finished Hermione, watching him carefully.

Jaime looked like he had been hit in the face with a wet fish, for all of ten; very long seconds, and then he threw back his head and *laughed*. It was a loud, dark, and bitter laugh, and a shiver went down Hermione's spine in response.

*This must have been what Sirius sounded like that day when they cornered him*, she thought, eyes wide.

Under his breath, he muttered, repeatedly, *"No honour. Nothing left. Gods - how did it come to this? My penance, I'm sure… Nothing to do. No purpose. Nothing left at all…"*

"What do you mean, penance? What does that have to do with your honour, Ser Jaime?" asked Hermione carefully. A mild relaxing charm sent to him wandlessly had the man slump further in his seat until he leaned over the table and cradled his head in his remaining hand.

"I'm sick of fighting," the man muttered, eyes closed. He looked tired, pale. "Let's call a truce."

"Between the Starks and Lannisters?" replied Hermione wryly, glancing at her parchment. "I don't think that will be accepted unless it's offered by your father - and even then, unless it's his head on a platter, it won't fly. I'm pretty sure most people in Winterfell - or the North - or the Riverlands - don't trust you."

He snorted. "Well, I trust you."

Hermione stared at him in disgruntled disbelief. *Oh, really? You trust me?*

"And, there it is. There's the look!" the man sighed and fell back against his chair, dropping his hand so it landed in his lap. He looked at her, almost vacantly. His arrogance had faded away. "I've seen it for seventeen years on face after face. You all despise me. Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, man without honor. You've heard of wildfire?"

"Can't say I have," replied Hermione.

"Well, the Mad King was obsessed with it," declared Jaime. "He loved to watch people burn, the way their skin blackened and blistered and melted off their bones. He burned lords he didn't like. He burned Hands who disobeyed him. He burned anyone who was against him. Before long, half the country was against him. Aerys saw traitors everywhere."

"I knew someone like that once," mused aloud Hermione, hoping to draw him in further with similarities. "But this Dark Lord was so paranoid about death; he found a way to split his soul to keep him alive. In the end, even his most faithful followers were thinking something was wrong when he'd torture them for the slightest of infractions, for marking his follower's children with brands like cattle."
Jaime stared at her for a long, horrified, minute. Then, he shook his head. "Wildfire is uncontrollable fire - green and bright and so hot it could melt iron back down to liquid. And the Mad King had his pyromancer place caches of wildfire all over the city. Beneath the Sept of Baelor and the slums of Flea Bottom. Under houses, stables, taverns. Even beneath the Red Keep itself."

Hermione's mouth dropped open, and she could feel the air in the room tense, as the others, silent and hidden, realized what they were hearing.

Jaime, however, continued blithely. His tone was impassive, almost monotone as he recited something he had kept hidden for a very, very long time. "Finally, Robert Baratheon marched on the capital after his victory at the Trident. But my father arrived first with the whole Lannister army at his back, promising to defend the city against the rebels. I knew my father better than that. He's never been one to pick the losing side. I told the Mad King as much. I urged him to surrender peacefully. But the king didn't listen to me. He didn't listen to Varys who tried to warn him. But he did listen to Grand Maester Pycelle, that grey, sunken cunt."

"Oh." Hermione slowly closed her eyes as she realized what was going to happen. "Jaime - you don't -"

"'You can trust the Lannisters,' he said. 'The Lannisters have always been true friends of the crown',' the blond continued, speaking over her and pitching his voice in a way to try to sound like the wizened Maester in King's Landing.

I should stop him, she thought furiously. Sansa and Arya are here. There are others here who lost family during that attack - these are people who knew Brandon and Rickard Stark.

But the other man rushed forward, his words starting to tumble over themselves in an effort to exorcize them from his vaulted memory. "So we opened the gates and my father sacked the city. Once again, I came to the king, begging him to surrender. He told me to... bring him my father's head." He shook his instead. "How could I, witch? How could I bring him my father's head? If the Wolf commanded you to kill your own father and stand by while thousands of men, women, and children burned alive, would you have done it? Would you have kept your oath then?"

Hermione bit her lip, turning her eyes away. As much as she cared for Robb, could she pick him over Harry or Ron? Or even her parents who were lost to her in fabricated memories? Either choice she made would result in her being severely torn over her decision.

Probably sensing the truth - or the complicated mess in her heart -, Jaime sent her a knowing look and said, "Then Aerys - he turned to his pyromancer. 'Burn them all,' he said. 'Burn them in their homes. Burn them in their beds.'"

"But that didn't happen," she said quietly.

"No. No, it didn't," replied Jaime darkly. "Why? Because, first; I killed the pyromancer. And then when the king turned to flee, I drove my sword into his back."

Despite the rest of the room hidden from him, Hermione knew at that moment that the silencing charm was unnecessary. The confession, the truth, would've silenced them all.

"I don't think he expected to die. He, he meant to... burn with the rest of us and rise again, reborn as a dragon to turn his enemies to ash," finished a contemplative Jaime. "So I slit his throat to make sure that didn't happen. That's where Ned Stark found me."

Hermione looked down, thinking about what she just heard. She knew the others were doing the
same, in varying degrees of belief and shock. The first to recover and send a message on her parchment was Lyra, sitting in for her mother. Why didn't he tell anyone?

Hermione repeated the question, and in response, the man turned stunned eyes on her. He then threw back his head and began laughing - but this time, it lacked the desperation his first laughs had. These were loud, bright, and very mocking.

"Tell? Whom would I tell? Stark?" he jeered. "You think the honorable Ned Stark wanted to hear my side? He judged me guilty the moment he set eyes on me. By what right does the wolf judge the lion? By what right?"

Then the man collapsed forward, his shoulders shaking as his repressed emotions erupted. Seventeen years of holding this in were finally too much and Jaime Lannister, and at that moment on top of his grief for his sister, the loss of his brother, he broke.

In the spelled silence of their council room, Hermione waited with infinite patience and kindness as the man slowly took the time to build himself back together, became a bit stronger, and maybe, a bit lighter having released the burden of his secrets.

Finally, he sniffed loudly and said, through a thick voice, "Are you going to execute me as a traitor now?"

Hermione knew that she couldn't make any snap decisions without everyone else's input - that was the point of the council, to begin with - but she knew that this was one decision she would stand by to her death and would fight them all on it.

"You're no traitor," she said firmly.

The words rang through the room, and Jaime lifted his face to stare at her. His eyes were red-rimmed and his face grey in colour, but there was something lighter about his eyes - like a shadow had been lifted, or a sun peeking from behind a cloud as it moved away.

"I - what?"

Hermione sighed. "You… were a kid placed in a bad, terrible place and made the best decision you could at the time. Did you handle it particularly well after the fact? No. But were you a traitor to your oaths?" She shook her head. "Not that I saw, Ser Jaime. You're no Kingslayer to me, and no one should have ever called you that - not given the crimes that man committed while in power."

"But I -" he looked around, confused. "I couldn't save the Princess - Princess Elia and Princess Rhaenys. I -"

But Hermione had been looking at her parchment, and while the man remained confused, a vote had been cast, led by Sansa of all people. Perhaps she was the most empathetic of the Lannisters, willing to see things in far more grey tones than Arya or the other Northern and River Lords, given her own experiences in the capital.

"Jaime Lannister," began Hermione, a tiny smile on her face as she read the result, "You may be guilty of a lot of things, most of which I doubt I'll ever know, but you're not a traitor to Westeros. Your actions saved an entire city of unarmed and innocent people. While you are still guilty of many, many other crimes - including actions that resulted in death during war - you will not be losing your life today."

"Then… tomorrow?" he grimly joked, bowing his head.
"Ever," replied Hermione.

His head popped back up.

"While you remain our prisoner and under constant guard, it is our recommendation that you get some air and spend some time thinking about your past actions and your reasons for acting the way you did," declared Hermione. "Make no mistake - this isn't an easy answer or an easy way out. You had to live with the secret of King Aerys' death, and you always will bear that mark against you. No one will forget. But maybe… you will learn to forgive yourself."

Shocked, the man stared at Hermione. An unseen signal had the guards from outside the room come back in and haul the man to his feet. He remained staring at Hermione even as they pulled him away and out the door, back to his room.

Hermione let the spells drop, but despite the ability to hear one another and see one another, the room remained fairly quiet.

"Do you think we did the right thing?" asked Arya quietly.

There were a few uneasy glances around the table and some awkward shuffling.

"Time will tell," said Hermione finally. She then cleared her throat and turned back to the council at large, tapping a finger on the parchment. Inky lines began to spread as an agenda appeared and began to form bullet points and lists with names and exclamation points next to important topics. "Now - shall we move on? We have a lot to cover today…"

Winterfell settled into some kind of post-war lull, with many of the Lords returning to their castles and holdfasts throughout the North and Riverlands shortly following the (very long) council meeting the other week. Not only was Jaime Lannister given permission to walk around Winterfell (albeit, with several armed guards following him at all times, as well as several other magical restrictions Hermione implemented), but he was a constant companion of Brienne of Tarth, although Hermione never saw the two of them speak to one another.

Sansa and Arya shared the duties of Lady of the Castle, with Sansa managing the smallfolk that began to trickle in with goods and wares and news from Winter Town. Whatever happened to her in King's Landing, whatever naive girl she may have been when she first travelled there, that girl had blossomed into a young woman, confident in her place and talents. The sixteen-year-old understand the Lords and Ladies far better than Arya (and Hermione), and knew just what to say to handle them. Both Arya and Hermione decided to leave the young woman alone in this, not fighting her on her decisions of who sits where at dinner, or when a particular meeting should take place or where, depending on the topic, and Sansa's handling of the figures and larder meant that they were managing just fine. (Of course, thought Hermione, another reason for people not arguing with Sansa, was the hulking mass of Sandor Clegane following silently behind her and providing the much smaller Lords with a steely eye and slight twist to his lips, which pulled at the scarred flesh on the side of his face.)

Arya, on the other hand, when not completing the duties Robb left her as the reigning power in Winterfell as his stead, spent her time with Brienne (and by extension, Jaime Lannister) for her sword training. It would be during those times that Hermione spied the Lannister's eyes brightening just a bit more, his mouth pull and twitch as he repressed a smile when Arya did something clever.

The first time he laughed Hermione had seen Arya launch herself at Lyra and Jorelle Mormont
during a three-way melee, disregarding her sword completely as the two sisters joined forces to take down the lithe teen. The three ended up covered in muck and mud, from head to toe, getting yelled at by Sansa as they tracked the mud into the Great Hall - and it was so reminiscent of Filch catching Hogwarts students returning from Hogsmeade that Hermione had grinned.

But not all the Lords had left, and not all was fun mud fights or sword training. Hermione remained busy organizing ravens and plans, and despite the availability of their PortKeys to return them home and back to Winterfell instantaneously, the Blackfish, Lords Umber, Karstark, Bolton, Blackwood, and Bracken remained behind.

More often, Hermione found herself not in the council chamber they had set aside for full meetings, but in the sitting room of her assigned quarters. She was no longer living out of her tent, having slowly migrated much of her collection of books to the various shelves she had transfigured from useless bric-a-brac in the chamber. A soft blanket throw was draped over one of the two armchairs from the tent, now before her fireplace, and even a moving, framed image of her, Harry, and Ron graced her bedside table.

"-if you think that would be the best place to introduce trade negotiations," finished a dubious Bracken, arms crossed as he surveyed the group around Hermione's desk from their conjured chairs.

The Blackfish nodded. "The Free Cities are the place to go."

Karstark sighed. "But which? Many of them, including Braavos, already have trade agreements with King's Landing. They might see it as a conflict of interest if we begin to make overtures."

Blackwood scoffed. "It's more money and an increase in a variety of goods. Why should that bother them?"

The group descended into squabbling, and Hermione reached up to rub at her temples. "Look - we know that transporting ice anywhere south will garner interest. Coming up with the idea of an icebox and ice to keep drinks and food cold - as well as for longer storage in ice houses - will catch on and people, especially in Braavos, Qarth, and others, will be interested. It'll just be a matter of a price we'll settle on and then beginning the jobs. It's not like we're not prepping for winter here."

There were some murmurs of agreement to that.

"Will these ice boxes be ready for the increased trade from the Riverlands?" asked Bolton quietly, eyes coolly surveying the others. "So that we have fresh food and grains coming from the warmer lands to our south to bolster our own stores?"

Hermione nodded, after glancing at Bracken and Blackwood first for confirmation. "It shouldn't be a problem-

"Excuse me, Lady Hermione; my Lords," Patrek Mallister stepped into the room from his place outside, blocking the sitting room's entrance with his frame. Someone shadowy hovered behind him. "You have a visitor. He claims it is of the greatest importance."

Hermione, frowning, shared a confused look with the men in the room with her. All wore varying shades of confusion and annoyance at being interrupted. "Send him in, Patrek."

The guard stepped aside and Robin Flint stepped in. His clothes were worn and dirty in places, and there were dark smudges of dirt on his chins. His lower jaw was covered in a thick beard, and there were marks under his eyes from a lack of sleep.

Upon entering the room, he immediately dropped to a single knee and bowed his head. "Forgive my
intrusion, my Lady," he began, and Hermione felt a frisson of something run down her spine, "But I rode all day and night to get here. Lady Mormont sent me - and did not wish to trust a raven with the news."

"News…?" asked the Blackfish quietly.

Flint lifted his head up to look at them. "It's the Wildings, my Lord. They've gathered an army of ten thousand strong and are marching on the Wall as we speak. They'll be there by the end of the week."

TBC..
The call went out just after Patrek led Robin Flint away to find a warm bath and fresh clothes: an emergency council meeting with full attendance was to be held immediately. No excuses.

Despite being fairly tired and fighting back a headache from the trade deal talks with the men, Hermione found herself power walking toward the council chambers, the same men trailing behind her a safe distance from the towering form of Grey Wind at her side.

Both Sansa and Arya met Hermione off near a T-intersection hallway in the family wing of the castle; Sansa was bleary and fighting sleep, stifling a yawn when she said, "What's going on, Lady Hermione? Why was a council called this late at night?"

Hermione sighed. "Lord Robin Flint arrived just moments ago from the Wall."

Sansa blinked while Arya rocked on her heels, looking far too awake for past midnight. The younger girl demanded, "Is it Jon? Has something happened with the Wildlings?"

"In a manner of speaking," replied Hermione tersely.

The two princesses shared a look, but fell into step with Hermione. It took some time, but when they arrived at the war room, it was nearly full with many sleepy Lords and representatives. It took some time, but soon order was called.

"Lord Flint," began Arya, glancing at Sansa and Hermione, both who nodded, "What news?"

The young man repeated what he told Hermione and those who were with her, to the growing speechlessness of the others.

There was some disquiet, which turned into grumbles. Soon, there was shouting.

"What does it matter to us?" one Lord shouted.

"Who cares about what happens north of the Wall? That's what the Wall is for," protested another.

"It should damn well matter!" bellowed the Greatjon, slamming a fist on the table and shaking it, "Since those Wildlings could break through and make it south!"

Another Lord scoffed, openly, and Hermione watched with wide eyes as chaos, as it never had happened before, descended on the council.

"We need to fight!" argued Karstark, his voice rising above the others, "We must fight!"

Someone shouted back at him, their words garbled and lost as others began side conversations or shouting matches.

*I don't believe this,* thought Hermione, turning to stare incredulously at Sansa, whose face was a stoic mask despite the annoyance her slightly down-turned mouth showed, and Arya, who was gaping widely at everyone.
"ENOUGH!" shouted Hermione, standing from her seat, and making her wand boom loudly. The noise echoed like a gunshot had gone off, making Brienne, behind Sansa, reflexively duck on her knees. She sent a sour look at Hermione. The noise also caught the attention of those in the room, and those who had been speaking fell silent.

"That's enough," repeated Hermione, taking the time to keep her voice even and to look and meet those who looked back at her. "Arguing does us nothing. The whole point of the Wall is, and please correct me if my education on the finer points of your history is wrong, to defend your lands against threats. Whether these threats are Wildlings or-" she caught Bolton's eyes, who glanced away. "Others-" there was a collective in-drawn suck of air by the Lords in the room "-we must stand together. There is no harm in following up on what Lord Flint has seen, nor what Lady Mormont has written."

"But what of the ice boxes? The trade agreement with the Free Cities?" moaned one Lord. "We can't just abandon those."

"Who said we would?" asked Hermione, rhetorically with a shrug of her shoulders. "Not everyone has to go to the Wall, you know. The wonderful thing about this council, and our communication parchments, is that we can continue to make decisions together even when physically separate. I'd suggest we have two trustworthy lords remain at Winterfell with Princess Arya and Princess Sansa, and that a host continues to the Wall."

"Seconded!" shouted Blackwood, immediately rapping on the table to indicate his support.

"Third," agreed a lesser lord, and soon a vote was tallied.

"Who will remain?" asked Karstark, looking around the room. Although it was never stated, there was an inner circle that Hermione considered her closest allies, and from there, those who spent the majority of their time around the two Stark Princesses.

"Lord Cerwyn has already begun to tackle the shipment and organization of everything," said Hermione, turning to look at the man halfway around the table. "Your organizational skills will come in handy, I think. And as a man of the North, and from a seat near Winterfell, you can be trusted to run things."

Sansa nodded along with Hermione. "And I would recommend a Riverlord - Lord Mallister. His experience with his ships and shipping routes will help the trade agreements and negotiations alongside Lord Manderly."

The votes were cast and agreed; from there, it was down to details of supply trains, resources, and when they would leave.

"It shouldn't be too long," said Arya, glancing out of the window, despite not being able to see anything in the darkness, "The days are getting shorter, and winter will be here soon enough."

"Agreed," said Umber. "No more than two weeks' time, I should think. That'll be enough to get provisions."

"And enough time to attempt new training with the new structure for our host," agreed Bracken with a bloodthirsty smile. "Think your boy can handle it, Blackwood?"

The larger, bearded man met his old rival's smile with a toothy one of his own. "Aye! My boy can handle anything thrown his way!"

"Good, then it's settled," said Hermione, glancing at Arya who nodded back. "Two weeks' time. We
head north to see what's going on at a Castle Black."

As the Lords filtered out, some to get an early start to their day, Arya reached forward and tugged on Hermione's sleeve until the older witch leaned toward the younger girl. "What is it, Arya?"

"Do you think Jon's going to be okay?" she whispered, conscious of anyone lingering behind. "Flint didn't say anything about him."

Hermione bit her lip and glanced away. "I don't know."

"But you'll find out, won't you?"

When she looked back at the younger girl, Hermione nodded and her voice was fierce when she said, "I lost one Stark - I won't lose you another. I can promise you that - I'll do whatever I can to help him."

A tingle of something made Hermione shiver.

"Good," replied Arya, but Hermione wasn't listening. Instead, she had her thoughts turned inward, feeling around her magic and wondering what caused the strange sensation - until she realized that she had sworn a vow.

Horror stole over her and she beat a hasty retreat from the council. Hopefully, whatever it took to help Jon at the Wall wasn't going to kill her with her vague vow - and that it was something she could morally agree with.

And in Westeros, she thought with a twist to her lips, you never knew which way people leaned on the moral spectrum.

Preparations were going smoothly, as far as Hermione could tell. Despite the weariness that had settled on her shoulders, the lack of sleep resulting in persistent fatigue, or the dullness in her eyes, Hermione stepped up to lead the Northerners and aid them with her magic - the one thing that wasn't faltering.

Blackwood and Bracken were in charge of the wood shipments, with Mallister, cataloging and dividing the materials across several oxen and carts. The Greatjon had stepped up as well, taking Hermione's suggestions to oversee their food rations, directing everything into mini-packs for the soldiers as well as larger quantities to bring to the Wall in what could be a long siege.

"-everything has been prepared as you want." Hermione blinked a few times to wake herself up and pay attention to Roose Bolton and his soft voice. "I and the others you selected, with Princess Sansa's help, have been organizing the men into commands and units. I must say that I find this ordering superior and easier to handle than the large number of men usually found under our command, separated by skill, or designated role."

Hermione nodded, glancing to the side of the large Great Hall doors that led to the inner courtyard and at two Winterfell guards on either side of the doors. They immediately sprang to attention, heaving back the heavy wooden beam that served as a barrier and lock, shifting and sliding the wood against the iron hooks until they could swing the doors open.

A blast of cold air brushed against Hermione and she flicked her hand at herself, Bolton, and Patrek and Lucas, covering the four with a nonverbal warming charm. Bolton nodded his thanks while the two men behind her murmured their appreciation.
Outside, the courtyard was a busy hive, with people moving back and forth. There were empty carts that rolled into the courtyard and left full of material; people rushing back and forward carrying orders or shouting commands; even washerwomen or seamstresses chasing after soldiers and men to sew patches or insignias onto their armour, each patch imbued with the magical Portkey sigil to ensure they were not accidentally lost.

"We'll need to leave shortly," replied Hermione, eyes moving across the courtyard. "Probably within the next day or so."

"Yes, of course-" Hermione stiffened, something beyond the cold forcing a shiver down her spine. It was her magic, tingling out a warning, or a nudge, for her to pay attention.

"Milady?" Patrek asked.

From behind, Hermione heard his feet shift on the snow-covered flagstone, and heard the heavy plates of his armour shift against one another as he moved; Hermione could imagine that he had his hand on the hilt of his sword, looking around the courtyard for the implied danger.

Frowning, Hermione's eyes slowly moved across the space, not lingering on anyone until just off to her right, at a blank space of snow. There was something fuzzy - just out reach for her - and she narrowed her eyes-

-but a blast of cold air blew up a cloud of snow and the fuzziness was gone. Although something lingered, Hermione shook her head, turning to face both Patrek and Lucas. "It's fine - it's nothing."

Patrek's gaze was narrowed, but they moved again, down the steps and towards the Greatjon. However, the uneasy feeling lingered in Hermione's mind as they gathered their supplies, ready to head out shortly for the Wall. There was much to do and instructions to be carried out by Cerwyn and Mallister, both who were staying behind in Winterfell to organize the ongoing trade with the Free Cities for their iceboxes. Both were keeping correspondence steady with news in the Riverlands and elsewhere while the majority of the Northern and Riverlands forces were going to head North at a snail's pace.

With the day of departure creeping steadily on them, Hermione decided to take a break from her nerves and soothe her tense back. Her shoulders had been creeping up as the days continued, to the point that Barbara had commented on the tenseness in her shoulders when she had brushed the brown-haired woman's unruly hair.

"A bath would do you well, milady," the young woman commented. "You need your rest."

Horrified, Barbara sputtered, "My Lady! No! Lady Hermione - not at all-"

"Sorry, Bar," replied Hermione, meeting the woman's brown eyes in the mirror. "I was just teasing. I know I'm tired."

And she was; organizing and effectively co-ruling with Arya (although Hermione certainly didn't see it that way, despite others who did), left its mark. Hermione was tired. She sustained herself on her magic and pure stubbornness, eager to tell her guards to get a rest and eat but often neglecting herself. She was beginning to feel like she had in her third year-

_Oh, who am I kidding?_ thought Hermione with a sigh. _This is exactly like third year, but I can't blame my exhaustion on a time turner._
"A bath would be lovely," said Hermione instead, turning a smile on Barbara who curtseyed and quickly backed out from the room to call for some servants. Hermione grimaced and hid her face; that was one thing she still hadn't got used to: the way Robb's guard followed her, how Barbara catered to her as her lady-in-waiting, the use of servants. It felt too much like using House Elves and laziness when Hermione could easily make do herself, especially conjuring water for a bath with *aguamenti* and a heating charm.

But she endured the women, carrying their buckets of piping hot water from a nearby hot water source (most likely pushed up from ancient pipes in the wall), until they left, carrying her soiled clothes for a wash. Barbara had set out her pajamas - at first, exclaiming at the indecency of sleeping in trousers and a shirt - but soon learned that Hermione's stare was an equal weight of judgment.

Hermione piled her hair on top of her head, disrobed, and then eased into the water, thinking back that one of the last few times she had a chance to enjoy a bath, that wasn't for necessity of keeping clean, was when she and Dacey had their scar trade-off. Her lips quirked into a smile at the memory, but then soon faded.

*I owe you,* she thought, staring into the steaming water. *I owe it to your family to find out what happened to you, no matter how scared I am to learn that you're dead. Or, worse: you're alive and I left you these long months to be tortured by someone.*

She leaned back and closed her eyes, slowly sinking down until her chin just rested above the water. She was lulling into a light doze when her mirror, charmed to vibrate when someone was calling her, activated.

Frowning, Hermione opened a single eye and glared at the device. Anyone else in the castle would either come to the door and then Edd or Donnal - her guards for the evening - would come in, pointedly not look at her, and tell her what they wanted; the only people who might use the mirror would be Sansa or Arya.

Concerned, Hermione reached one dripping hand toward the mirror and summoned it, thinking *accio* strongly as the silver flew across the room and into her hand. She tilted it enough so she was still covered, and activated the mirror.

And nearly dropped it in the water.

Robb Stark stared at her, and her heart leaped into her throat, her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth. Her eyes widened and took in his appearance: he had a layer of scruff on his cheeks and chin, a darker red to his hair, and his blue eyes were clear and wide as they surveyed her. And strangely, he was wearing a Weasley jumper.

"Robb!" his name burst from her mouth and water sloshed as she tried to sit up in the tub but slipped.

Then the mirror clouded and the connection dimmed.

Hermione held her breath for a moment and then, voice wavering, she tentatively called, "Robb? Robb Stark?"

But the mirror remained blank, and Hermione carefully placed the mirror on a nearby towel before sinking below the water line, if only to hide the tear tracks on her face.

Ten months.

Ten months with nothing but a nearly broken mirror, the beginning of what Madam Pomfrey called
an ulcer, a raging temper, and nothing to show. He had been stuck in Hermione's world for nine months and those assigned to help him return to his world, to Westeros, were about as far along as they had been when he first arrived.

Rubbing the heels of his hands against his tired eyes and hunched as he collapsed down on the chair in his new room. It was beautiful, he could admit that, but so far, everything at Hogwarts had an ethereal beauty to it. Things were clean, the lines and materials for furniture crisp and modern in ways that his rough, homespun equivalents weren't. But each glance at chrome, at the callous use of copper for decoration of all things, made Robb cringe just a bit more.

It wasn't Harry's fault - Hermione's best friend had slowly become a better friend to him as well, and the idea of moving their research from Grimmauld Place to Hogwarts was a welcome one. With the school over for the session, they were able to move around freely without anyone questioning him or his friendliness with war heroes, and access the library as well as the many portraits.

Instead of being in the library with the others, Robb was having a proper sulk. The longer he remained away from Westeros, the worse his feelings became toward his ultimate return. Whatever brought him here, or was keeping him from returning - he felt like it was the gods laughing at him for being such a failure as a King.

If I ever get home, I promise I'll do better, he vowed fiercely, playing with one of the daggers he had on his body when he arrived in Britain. He flopped the flat of the knife back and forth on the arm of the chair, his mind wandering, and eyes lingering on his discarded message mirror on a nearby coffee table. The etched runes hadn't worked seven months ago, and he was sure they wouldn't now - but that didn't stop him from periodically trying.

He reached for it, propped the mirror up open in his hand, and said, quietly, "Hermione Granger."

The mirror fogged up.

Robb's breath caught and he sat upright. A connection!

"Hermione?" he called, hand shaking.

The fog in the mirror swirled until it cleared, and for a brief moment, he saw Hermione's face: it was pale, with dark smudges under her eyes and her hair was piled on top of her head, with wet ringlets and curls either frizzing from humidity or hanging wetly against her neck. Beads of water rolled down her neck and his eyes followed the trail until the edge of the mirror where he spied a hint of cleavage from a naked chest.

She's in the bath! His breath caught and his eyes flew up to hers. They were wide and her mouth had dropped open, her mouth forming his name but then all he saw was his reflection.

"NO!"

Robb's hands shook and he clutched the mirror with both as he stood from his chair, fiercely staring down at the mirror, shouting repeatedly, "HERMIONE GRANGER! HERMIONE GRANGER!"

That was how Harry found him, hours later, hoarsely saying Hermione's name in a broken, scratchy voice.

"Let's go through things again," suggested Luna, her voice cheery despite the resounding groans from everyone else around her.
"Must we?" asked Ron, bringing his head down and forward onto the table with a thunk.

"I have to agree with Ron, Luna," said Harry, rubbing his eyes underneath his glasses. "We're at the end of our ropes, here!"

Robb's gut churned.

Earlier, when Harry had found him, the king had excitedly recalled the mirror working for a brief moment. The wizard had been ecstatic and quickly sent a Patronus message to everyone to meet - and that had been several hours ago. The moon had very quickly risen and now hung in the night's sky, illuminating the tiny corner of the library where several witches, wizards, and one King sat.

Their table was covered in books, some open, some in haphazard piles; scrolls and rolls of parchments, many with fresh ink on them, lay drying between Luna, Professor Flitwick, and Bill Weasley; Ron and Harry were on one end with Robb, while the others were opposite them. In between were McGonagall and Fleur, as well as George. George's hair was mussed and standing up on ends from the numerous times, he had run his hands through the orange locks.

"I still can't explain it," sighed Bill, his scars from Greyback in relief against his worn face. "It was an anomaly, Luna, and starting the equations over-

"No," the blonde said, shaking her head and letting her radish earrings hit her cheeks, "Let's go back to the beginning. When Robb first arrived."

The group stared back at her.

"But we all know what happened," moaned Ron. "Why do we need to listen to this again?"

"I think we're missing something," replied Luna, a slight frown on her face. "Remember when he dream-walked? He saw Hermione. Professor Firenze mentioned his gods were watching, and he ended up at the Weirwood tree. The trees were the connection… the woods. Wood is part of the earth."

Fleur had a strange look on her face. "You think the forest is the method of travel?"

Robb sat up straight in his seat, pushing against hope.

"No."

Robb sighed and slumped in his seat.

"I think it's part of it."

Harry's face was scrunched up in confusion. "Luna - you're going to need to explain."

"There was a fight - a battle?" she asked, turning to Robb to face him directly.

The King nodded, slowly. "My men were massacred at the Twins. Under a peace talk."

Those around the table in the library were all survivors and veterans of Voldemort's war and campaign against them. The shuttering of their faces spoke volumes of their own thoughts of what a 'massacre' meant.

Luna nodded in reply. "So: blood."

"Sweat," said Fleur, in a voice of dawning understanding, "Both are water-based."
Flitwick leaned back in his seat and Robb could tell he was refraining himself from clapping jovially. "Air! From the distance of space of the Portkey travel."

"Earth; the woods," continued Bill, his own eyes wide and voice low.

Harry felt like he was missing something as the other Purebloods around the table seemed to cotton on to what was going on; even Ron had perked up at the table, a thoughtful frown on his face. "But what about fire?"

Everyone had a look of confusion about them until Luna spoke next. "It was winter where you are from, correct?"

Robb blinked. "Yes…?"

"What was the month?"

"Month?" Robb looked blankly around. He remembered Hermione once complaining that he and the Westerosi used moons to count time, whereas she used months. He rolled his eyes up the ceiling as he tried to find a way to translate, mentally counting back to the date of the massacre.

Autumn had a firm grip in the North, with snow and frost; the Twins had been cold - he remembered the freezing rain that had come down the week prior to the attack and the heavy fog. But when seasons could last years, there was no point in counting months the same way.

"Erm, well, it was an Ice Moon-" he began haltingly.

Flitwick beamed. "The first of February!"

At the blank look Ron and Harry sported, the half-goblin professor explained, "An Ice Moon is another name for the first full moon in January or February-"

"And if we go under the assumption that it was approximately the first of February," continued Bill, his voice rising in excitement, "Then it would also fall under Imbolc-"

With Luna finishing, "Also known as Saint Brigid's festival day; the goddess of fire." Luna smiled brightly, adding, "Among other things. Thus bringing full circle, earth, water, air, and fire."

There was a moment of breathless accomplishment by several of those around the table, but the look of confusion between Harry and Robb did not lessen their confusion. "Erm, what?" asked Harry dumbly.

McGonagall sighed. "Because Potter, it's all four elements. If I understand Miss Lovegood correctly here, if we replicate that, then King Robb may return home."

Elation burst through Robb at the words.

"Much of that is easily replicated," agreed Flitwick, nearly vibrating. "A small cut for the blood; the air is in abundance in the magic here at Hogwarts; and we have the Forbidden forest, where he was found. The date is slightly problematic."

"No, it's not," retorted Luna. Heads swung to face her and she serenely smiled back. "Tomorrow is midsummer - a day where we light bonfires."

"Fire," breathed Harry, eyes wide behind his glasses. He then turned to Robb, who, equally shocked and wide-eyed, staring at everyone around the table before leaping to his feet.
"Thank you," he said, his voice low and feverish, as he looked everyone at the table in the eye. "Thank you."

There wasn't time for a feast; as soon as they figured it out, Robb had raced back to his rooms and began throwing things into the expanded satchel Bill Weasley had given him, not caring at the mess he made as he rolled a shirt into a ball. There would be time to iron out wrinkles when he was back home.

But it was hard, watching the odds and ends he had collected over the past ten months vanish. His clothes from the wardrobe went first, all the jumpers and jeans he had been given by the Weasleys and Harry, including what he wore that day as he quickly changed into the homespun linens and cottons of his Westerosi and Northern heritage.

Then, it was the books he had read, bought from Waterstones or given to him from Ginny, the extra copies the Heroes of Hogwarts owned of their past and deeds. The moving images on the covers scowled as they were shoved into the darkness of the satchel, the pages flapping, unhappy at their rough handling.

Then, toiletries, with a few trips made back and forth between the room and en suite as Robb always remembered that one last thing, until he had to call for a house elf to help. With a snap of its fingers, his room was devoid of personality and was as bare as it was when he first took possession.

He was standing in the middle, vaguely feeling like he was forgetting something when Harry entered with a soft knock on the portrait frame.

The black-haired man whistled as he entered. "Does this place ever look different!"

Robb turned. "I keep thinking I'm forgetting something - but I've packed it all. How strange is that?"

Harry shook his head. "It sounds perfectly normal to me." He looked around the room again. "Anyway - a few of us want to say goodbye. I know you said no dinner, but maybe you'll indulge us?"

Sighing, Robb hoisted the satchel up and over his head, slinging the bag across his body. The leather crisscrossed with his bracers and came to a rest on the hip opposite his empty sword scabbard.

The walk through Hogwarts' halls was bittersweet. Some portraits called out goodbyes and good lucks; others followed them from landscape to portrait to tapestry, shouting last minute advice that Robb couldn't use ("-and don't forget the helpful swish and flick for you decapitation spell, Your Highness!").

"You made a lot of friends," commented Harry with a small smile on his face.

"Something I never thought possible of a portrait," replied Robb wryly.

"Yeah, they do grow on you."

They fell silent until they arrived at the Great Hall. It was late for a dinner - nearly midnight - but the faculty at Hogwarts had rallied together, and many of the members of the Order of the Phoenix who had helped him in some capacity or another were there (some, like Kingsley, wide-eyed from their late-night jobs, while others, such as Neville Longbottom, were bleary-eyed from being woken).

Robb couldn't remember the details of that feast; just that there were many well-wishes, words to pass on to Hermione when they met up, and helpful advice and encouragement for his own rule.
Then, he was standing outside, looking back at the castle in the darkness as its lights flickered and it became swallowed up by the gloom as he and Harry, his guide, walked toward the Forbidden Forest.

Both Harry and Robb were quiet as they left Hogwarts. Robb was concentrating on picturing Winterfell and his home in his head, consolidating the very essence of home the way that Professor Firenze instructed; Harry, for all Robb knew, was contemplating an Auror report for work with the frown and furrow between his brows.

The days were long and sunny, and that evening remained pleasant but not humid; some birds were still chirping, and there was a pleasant scent from the nearby flower bushes, hidden in the dark by sight but not smell. The grass was springy as they stepped off the path and headed towards Hagrid's hut, but then they detoured around it and his garden patch. Yet, the moment they stepped up to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, there was a chill and the cheerful chirps from the nearby birds were silenced.

Robb shivered, but took a deep breath and took a few steps forward into the near pitch-black forest along the dirt path before him. After a few steps, he realized Harry had stopped.

"Harry?" he asked, turning. His voice was slow, hesitant as his brows furrowed and the leathers of his original jerkin shifted and creaked under his steel armour. "Aren't you coming?"

Still, at the edge of the forest, Harry offered Robb a smile - but it was sad, resigned. He put his hands into the pockets of his robes and shook his head. "No. Sorry, Robb, but I'm not going with you."

Robb's breath froze in his chest, a physical blow and he stumbled. "I - I beg your pardon?"

"I'm not going with you to Westeros, Robb," repeated Harry, his voice gentle. "I'm sorry I'm only telling you this now - but I can't go."

"But - but -" Robb covered the distance he travelled into the forest and stood an arm's length from Harry. "But what about Hermione? Or - or helping me with my kingdom? The North?"

"You don't need me to help you be a good king," laughed Harry, as if Robb was a child who said something ridiculously silly and obvious. His voice was kind, though. "You're brilliant on your own. And you don't need another magical user - you have Hermione. She's worth ten of me, I'm sure."

"But it's Hermione, Harry," argued Robb, dropping his own voice, a frown on his face. "Aren't you - don't you want to see her again?"

"Oh, I'll see her again," the black-haired man replied with conviction. "But not like this. This is - this is your journey, Robb. You came here for a reason."

"Some reason," the king muttered under his breath. "I've been in Britain for ten months, Harry, away from everything I ever knew. What did I learn? Hmm?"

The look Harry sent him was slightly patronizing. "Robb…"

The other man sighed, turning his face away and running a hand through his hair, messing it up. The waves were thick, covered in some product Fleur had lent him some time ago. He grimaced at the feel. What have I learned, being here? He wondered petulantly, Other than how alien this world is to mine?

But he knew that was unfair; Robb had learned quite a lot, and he had to admit it to himself with a sigh as he glanced at Harry, who had a knowing glint in his emerald eyes.
"Fine," the other man replied, a tiny pout on his lips. "I did learn a lot from being here."

"Like?"

Robb resisted a growl or to reach out and shake Harry. But he did speak, although with a dry tone that was of one repeating memorized facts. "I learned about Hermione. I learned about you, and Weasley, and the Battle of Hogwarts. I learned a lot about magic, and spell crafting, and rules and limitations. I learned about technology and the future, and about great heroes and leaders in trying times."

Harry smiled. "Anything else?"

"I learned I can trust myself to make decisions," sighed Robb, a small answering smile coming to his face now. "That even when I'm put in a strange, unfamiliar place, I am strong and capable enough to adapt and survive."

"Important things to be sure," replied Harry with a laugh. "Being thrust into a strange new world could break anyone's mind and soul."

Robb nodded and said, quietly, "It's a wonder Hermione didn't just curse us all when we wandered into the clearing that day we met. She could've just as easily bound us and wiped our memories, but she didn't."

"Who knows why she did or didn't do it," replied Harry, "Even if the Statute would allow it. But it probably had something to do with her experiences with her parents."

Robb winced in sympathy. "They won't ever…?"

Harry shook his head. "No. They won't ever remember her. They'll live their lives out as Wendell and Monica Wilkins. A constant reminder and gash on Hermione's soul that magic can't solve everything - and even worse, that magic can be twisted and has a mind of its own."

The two men were silent a moment longer, with Robb slowly bringing his eyes back around and forward to the darkened forest ahead of him.

"So I just… walk, is that it?" he asked quietly.

Harry nodded, taking a step forward so he was level with Robb. "You just walk forward. And, if Luna and Firenze are right about everything - which they are - you'll find yourself home in Westeros."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," confirmed Harry.

Robb frowned. He said, skeptically, "I don't know if I can trust magic like that. We don't even know what caused the Portkey to yank me here, to begin with, and now we're trust - tree magic and a set of circumstances to return me?"

"The only link between Westeros and here, and your experiences in your dreams are trees. You worship your gods by trees, Robb," reminded Harry. "What harm is there in trying? If there's one thing I learned, is that magic doesn't follow the rules. 'Sides, you have that flare George made for you if you don't find yourself back in Westeros before your rations run out. We'll come to get you and we'll try again."
Robb sighed.

They fell silent again, until Harry said, tentatively, "It's not easy, is it? Walking through the forest to your destiny."

Robb huffed a laugh. "No. No, it's not."

"It was hard when I did it, too." Robb turned to look at Harry quizzically; Harry caught the look and there was a pained expression in his smile, one that was equally parts resignation and remembrance. "I died in the forest."

What? Robb's eyes widened.

Harry caught the look and laughed, a little. "It was during the Battle of Hogwarts. Ron, Hermione, and I kept this part from the books so that no one knew how close we came to failing. But I just learned I was a Horcrux and Dumbledore's entire plan was for me to sacrifice myself - so that the soul sharing my body would be the target of the Killing Curse. Once that Horcrux was gone, I'd be free to kill Voldemort."

"That… was risky," replied Robb eventually, mulling over the idea of sending a close friend of his to their death on a gamble. Could he have done it? Send Sansa, or Arya, or Bran or even Rickon or Jon, out into the Wolfswood, on a gamble that a part of them had to die to be reborn, or successful? Wasn't that what the Targaryens had tried with Summerhall and rebirthing their dragons only to fail?

"It was incredibly risky, but I did it anyway. I walked by myself down this path to a clearing further into the forest, and let Voldemort point his wand at me and kill me," said Harry. "Dying was easy, Robb. So, so easy. It was like going to sleep and waking up somewhere else, and being told I had a choice."

He turned to face Robb fully. "I made a choice. I didn't have to make it, to return. Neville could've finished of Nagini and the others could've killed Voldemort without me. Not easily, but they could have." He shook his head. "Being a hero - their hero - meant making tough decisions. It meant going back and continuing to fight. It was being brave in the face of the unknown."

"That it is," said the King softly.

"Exactly," nodded Harry, bringing his wand out from his pocket and making a swishing movement between the two men. As he did so, the wand traced a shape in the air, the outline of which glowed a brilliant gold and white. "And with that being said - It's time for this to be given to someone who is brave of heart."

Robb watched, eyes growing wide as the glow disappeared, and a broadsword, similar in length and style to his father's Ice, hung suspended in the air between the two men. The sheen from the gold hilt bounced off the little beams of light that punctured through the dense canopy of the trees around them, and the silver-honed hue of the steel glimmering an almost blue.

"Harry - this is -"

"This, Robb, is Godric Gryffindor's blade. It's goblin-made, excellent quality, and its steel is covered with the deadliest poison from our world," explained Harry, reaching out and gripping the hilt. The blade shimmered a moment and then shrunk to fit Harry's hand and frame, going from a broadsword to a bastard blade. Harry experimentally swung it a few times. "Only the bravest and truest of men can wield it."

"You used this kill the basilisk when you were twelve," said Robb, remembering the story Ginny
Harry nodded, bringing the sword to rest so that the tip was pointed at the ground. "It served me well then, but it's time it went to a new home."

"A new home?" echoed Robb, confusedly.

Harry grinned and handed the sword to him. Robb fumbled with the hilt for a moment, and then swung it up and around as his grip changed, the hilt growing wider and thicker and the blade growing longer until it was shaped exactly like Ice; even the steel shimmered and turned a whiteish-silver that complimented the gold of the hilt.

"It's yours now," said Harry, clapping Robb on the shoulder as he did so. Robb stared at him in befuddlement. "Besides. What use do we wizards have for a broadsword in the twenty-first century? Wands are definitely an elegant weapon for a more civilized age."

"I - Harry, I can't take this," stuttered Robb.

"Sure you can; just like so," argued Harry pleasantly, rocking a bit on his heels in pleasure. "It's yours. You need it more than we do, and maybe this will give you the edge you need in a battle with your enemies."

"Thank you," breathed Robb, blinking rapidly to hide the sheen in them. "You've been a true friend. I just - why can't you come? Your wisdom and help would mean so much."

"You don't need me Robb," explained Harry, stepping back, closer to Hogwarts and away from the forest. "Besides, I was the hero of the story once before. I did my duty then, and while I didn't completely hang up that title and mantle, being an Auror, I have responsibilities and duties here that I can't abandon. I can't rush off into danger anymore."

"But-"

"Robb. If you need us, I promise you, I will come," said Harry, his eyes fixed firmly on his friend. "But right now? You need to go back. Hermione's been alone too long. She needs you, too."

Robb squeezed his eyes shut, turning his back on Harry. It was painful, and it was hard to acknowledge he had grown close and dependent on his friend in this realm. But he also knew he couldn't stay - Harry's words of responsibility and duty reminded him he was a King, and his people needed him. He could appreciate and understand that if anything.

Without turning, Robb nodded once and said, loudly, "Thank you Harry."

He clutched at the sword, and then expertly sheathed it in his empty scabbard. The sword fit perfectly. He then began a purposeful stride forward, never once looking back. He knew Harry remained where he was, eyes on his back until Robb disappeared into the thick forest because it was some time before that knowing itch of someone watching him went away - if at all. There was something strange about the Forbidden Forest, its wide trees and the low hum of barks and croaks of creatures.

Soon, the dirt path he had begun his journey on disappeared. Left floundering for a moment, Robb looked left, and then right, and then shrugged; he continued forward off the path, on a new path of his own decision and with the knowledge that eventually, he should return home.

It took him several hours, much longer than he had expected when the sun went down and the summer chill of the forest turned autumn-like, his breaths coming out in misty pants, that Robb
realized that the trees were no longer the same as the start of his journey.

He paused, and turned in a circle, looking up.

Gone were the pine trees and green pointed leaves of the trees in the Forbidden Forest. These trees around him were thicker in their trunks, moss-covered and the leaves a silvery-green colour that would seem strange for others but was welcoming for him.

Home, he thought, nearly dropping the sword of Gryffindor to reach into the magically expanded bag and withdraw the mirror Hermione had enchanted for him over a year ago. His hands shook as he pulled it out, and his voice cracked when he stated, "Hermione Granger."

The glass of the mirror went foggy - yes! He thought, wanting to pump his fist in the air in triumph like he saw Ginny do once at a Quidditch match. There's a connection! - but…

No one answered.

Robb frowned.

"Arya Stark? Sansa Stark?" desperately, at each name not connecting despite the foggy interior, Robb began naming others. "Roose Bolton? Rickard Karstark? Torrhen Karstark? Dacey Mormont!"

Baffled, he stared down at the mirror, flipping it over to inspect the runes that Bill, Fleur, and Professor Flitwick had etched into it. Thoughtfully, he hummed under his breath and then looked up and around at the silent forest around him.

A bird chirped in the distance, and a loud caw from a raven above him had him look up, startled. The black bird seemed to inspect him as well, thoroughly, before flapping its wings in agitation. It shook itself and then peered beadily at him. "Caw!"

"I - what?" Robb looked from the raven to the forest, and then back to his mirror. With that avenue shut, he found himself floundering. I return to Westeros but I have no idea where I am. How am I supposed to make it back to the northern camp? Where are they?

"Kaw!" the raven reprimanded him in an odd cough, and he jumped, looking up at it.

It flew from its branch to another, almost jerking its beak at him as it cawed again, loudly and for a prolonged moment as it stretched its vocal sound. "Keeeeeey."

Robb stared at the raven blankly, and it stared back at him. After a long moment, he leaned forward and asked it, almost seriously, "Are you a wizard shapeshifter?"

The raven ruffled its feathers and gave Robb a very imperious look. "Keey," it intoned again, in its strange caw.

"Key?" repeated Robb quietly, frowning. "Key?" He paused. "My gods, PORT-key! I have a Portkey! I can get to Winterfell!"

With a bright grin, he looked back at the raven to thank it - having spent nearly a year in the wizarding world of Hermione and Harry's, he wasn't averse to such strange things anymore - but the raven flew off, disappearing into the thick leaves of the trees above him.

His hand came up to the wolf's broach he had pinned to his cloak, fingering the delicate work Gendry had put into his design. The snarling wolf - his family's sigil - was comfort and he imagined
he could feel it pulse with Hermione's magic.

"Gryffindor," he said. After so much time at Grimmauld Place and Hogwarts, Robb could recognize the feel of magic and here, after speaking the password, it enveloped him just as the anchor hooked him from his navel and sent him spinning through space and across a large distance, depositing him hard on solid frozen ground in the clearing by the ruined tower.

Huffing a breath, Robb stood to his full height, mentally cataloging that he hadn't left anything behind - even the sword was still clutched tightly in his right hand.

Then, he peered around and saw the markings of several fire pits and tent poles that scourged the ground, but the area was abandoned, covered with fresh, undisturbed snow. No one had been at the tower for some time.

With a slightly disappointed sigh, Robb thought, *well. I'll have a trek to make. But at least Winterfell isn't far.*

Tilting his head up slightly, he turned in a slow circle until he faced approximately east. In the distance, there were faint clouds - or clustered smoke - and knew he had a direct bearing. One foot stepped forward, and then the next, and soon he had an easy stride propelling him forward through the dense forest, his boots crunching on the snow.

The sun met its zenith and then began slowly to swoop down as it fell behind Robb. Its long rays struggled to reach over the tops of the trees in the Wolfswood as Robb breached the tree line, coming upon the furthest edges of Torrhen's Square between the town and the road that led to Winterfell.

The road itself was repaired, altered from the dirt path it had been with deep furrows from carts and hooves to an actual stone road, with an unnaturally smooth surface that only magic could have made. There were a few heading into Torrhen's Square from Winterfell, mainly with empty carts, and Robb halted one as they passed.

"You!" he called, jogging a few steps forward to catch the man's attention. "Where are you coming from?"

The common folk looked Robb up and down, a faint look of surprise on his face as he surveyed the man. Taking in his clean appearance, the haggard man replied, "From Winterfell milord."

"What for? What is it that you do?" asked Robb curiously.

"It's for the wood that Lord Umber asked for," the man replied, blinking. "To repair the damage done at Winterfell. Others," the man then nodded at a cart several yards ahead of him, continuing on its way, "Were collecting ice and bringing it to Torrhen's Square for collection."

"Ice?" echoed Robb.

"Aye, milord," the man said, now looking at him in suspicion. "Where've you been, if you don't mind my askin'? Everyone around here knows that the Lord's council is making money off of selling ice to them southerners and preparin' to go north to the wall. Why, I've ever heard that old buildings are being rebuilt!"

Robb stared at the man, agog. "I've... I've been a while. For some time."

"I'll say."

The two stared at each other for a moment longer, before Robb skillfully and deftly pulled out a few
copper pieces that he had on him from before the massacre at the Twins. "For your time. Thank you."

The man took the coins and nodded, turning back and pulling on his cart as he continued down the smooth road. By the time the sun had fully set, Robb could see the outline of Winterfell ahead, torches flickering like beacons from multiple points along the battlements.

He was weary, not quite exhausted, but worn down; by the time he reached the gates where several Stark bannermen stood at attention. Their eyes were alert - something he hadn't expected from his own previous experience of men at arms who were often tired after standing still for so long - and nearly stumbled into one when the guard stepped forward and called, "Halt!"

Robby squared his shoulders.

"Who goes?" the guard called, reaching back for a torch that the other guard passed forward to better see the young redhead.

"Robb Stark of Winterfell," said Robb, his voice hoarse but loud. "King in the North. Now let me through."

The guard who stepped forward held a torch up, his mouth dropping open. "M-My Lord -" he cleared his throat and bowed at the waist, low. "Your Grace! Lady Hermione had placed a spell to keep your disappearance quiet but now that you're here - and we can speak of you-!"

The other guard bowed and Robb nodded at them both. "I'll learn more about this shortly, I'm sure. But for now… I'd like to enter."

"Of course, Your Grace!" the first guard agreed, quickly rising and knocking on the gate. From the other side, the lever cranked and the heavy doors opened slowly, revealing a lightly lit courtyard.

"Shall we announce you, Your Grace?" the second guard asked, eagerly.

Robb shook his head. "No, thank you."

"Your Grace?"

The King turned around, a weary look on his face. But the guard - a younger man, maybe only a few years older than him - swallowed and said, his lips twitching as he tried a nervous smile, "I'm glad you've returned."

Robb felt his own lips turn up in a small smile in response. "Thank you."

The two guards bowed again and the doors creaked shut behind him. Robb stepped forward, out from under the thick tunnel that separated the exterior wall and exterior courtyard and stables. Inside, many people who moved in the cold air paused as he began walking familiar paths.

On either side, mouths dropped open and he could hear the excited and surprised murmurs as people recognized him and began repeating the same things repeatedly: "It's the King! It's King Robb! He's returned! He's back!"

Slowly a crowd found itself forming behind him as he pushed past the stables and then under another wall, the two guards on the outside of that hastily and quickly throwing the doors open. He nodded his thanks, striding forward and picking up speed until he was in the inner courtyard, near the entrance to the great hall.

"I - Your Grace?" a startled voice said from off to his side, and Robb glanced to see Lord Cerwyn
staring at him. "Your Grace!"

The man's voice carried through the suddenly quiet courtyard, and Robb let his gaze carefully travel over familiar faces: Lord Cerwyn, Lord Umber's as his mouth split into a wide grin; two young women, dressed in armour who could only be Mormonts; his great-uncle, rushing toward him with a relieved expression on his face. Then he was turning to the flagstone tiered steps in front of the great hall, and it felt like everything around him froze.

There, standing on the steps of the courtyard, eyes wide, was Hermione. Her face was pale, but her amber coloured eyes were fixed on him and her curly hair blew in the chilly wind that swept down to them from the North. She opened her mouth, but was too far away to be heard, especially as people around him began to clamour and greet. But Robb knew what she was saying, anyway:

*You're back.*

Then he was walking toward her, unheeding of the men around him, the looks and stares he was getting as his walk increased in speed until he was jogging, and then running the last few steps - and Hermione was coming down the steps -

He crushed her against his chest, holding her tight and burrowing his nose in the crook between her neck and shoulder, breathing in her scent deeply.

"Hermione," he said, his voice low and wretched, the bag Harry gave him dropping somewhere behind and the sword of Gryffindor making an awful clang as it hit the stone.

He felt her fingers claw, and dig into his shirt, near the back of his neck. She held on tight and squeezed herself tighter to press against him. Her voice was breathless as she asked, "How? How did you-?"

He drew back partially, enough to look down into her face as one of his hands slid up to cup the back of her head. His eyes sparkled when he breathlessly laughed, "Magic."

Her eyes grew wide. "Magic?"

"It's a long story," he said, eyes drinking her in, even as he frowned when he noticed the marks under her eyes. "It involves magic, and a wizard named Harry…"

Her round eyes went wider, and she nearly shouted, "Harry! You went to Hogwarts?"

"Later," he said, his voice dropping. "I promise. I'll tell you everything."

She nodded, eyes roaming his face and cataloging differences from her memories. "I missed you."

Robb closed his eyes and nearly groaned. "I missed you more, I promise you that."

"I doubt it," replied the witch, a bit of a teasing tone entering her voice.

When Robb's eyes opened, he looked down at her with all the warmth he could muster. "No. I don't think you quite know, Hermione…"

They were completely enthralled with one another, for several long, long moments. But then someone was speaking, "Your Majesty," repeatedly. Robb did not move his head to face them; instead, he kept his eyes focused solely on Hermione.

"I-" she started.
He shook his head. "We have a lot to discuss."

Her eyes shuttered briefly. "Do we?"

Fondness crept in his voice and he dragged a finger affectionately down her cheek as he lowered her from her toes to her feet from their exuberant hug. "Yes, I think we do," he replied huskily.

"Your Majesty."

"Is it life or death?" he asked, without looking away.

Hermione's lips twitched.

"I- ah - beg your pardon, Your Majesty?"

Robb repeated himself. "Is. It. Life. Or. Death? Do you absolutely need me at this moment?"

Hermione backed away, shaking her head and withdrawing from his arms. "There's a lot that you need to be caught up on, Robb. And besides, you should see Sansa and Arya-"

The young King's blue eyes lit up. "They're here?"

Hermione nodded.

It was like the bubble that had kept them apart from everyone else burst at that moment, because the voices of the men around them began clamouring over one another, each rising in panic and deliverance:

"-The wildlings are amassing an army, Your Grace-"

"-Killed the Frey bastards that did this-"

"-Selling ice in the south, it's very profitable-"

"-Worries about wights, Your Highness-"

"-Need your signature and seal on at least ten different letters to be sent out, Your Grace-"

Robb, inundated by voices, felt quickly swept up by his lords, their voices washing over him as well as their feet carrying him further away from Hermione as they ushered him into Winterfell, the opposite way she was heading. His guard - Lucas, and Patrek - quickly fell into step behind him while Eddard Karstark and Daryn Hornwood - Robb nearly did a double take when he saw that the man was missing some of his arm - remained behind with Hermione.

As the large group of Lords swept him away, Robb twisted, turned, and did his best to keep Hermione's face in his line of vision until he was inside, and her smiling face was the last thing he saw as the doors swung shut behind him and his crowd.

Hours later, once the sun had finally risen and his men were seen, listened, and spoken to, Robb finally had a chance to get a few hours' sleep, crashing hard on his bed (His bed! he thought gleefully), before ordering a bath.

He was enjoying the heat of his bath - the tendrils of steam rising from the warm water curling his hair more so than normal, especially those at the nape of his neck into tight swirls of auburn. He let his hands drape over the edge of the tub on either side, water dripping from his wet fingertips as the
cool air of the room chilled his arms. It was the first time he felt he could relax. The baths at Hogwarts were nice, especially the prefects' bath that Harry showed him - although the pervy ghost, Myrtle, was discomforting - it wasn't home.

Home meant that the chilled air was familiar - a comfort - a reminder of his childhood. While not in his childhood room, having been given his grandfather's old room, the view was similar and the slightly open window, overlooking the Wolf's Wood beyond the stone wall that surrounded the ancestral Stark seat, carried the scent of cool winter air.

It was gently snowing outside, the morning sun bright and glinting off large, soft flakes. It was quiet beyond the window, the air still and calm. Robb sighed and sank further.

He almost missed the sound of the door behind him opening. At any other time, he would've protested, rising and snatching the sword of Gryffindor where it rested against a stool, within reaching distance, but only one person would dare breach the sanctity of his room - and more so, his bath.

"Aren't you cold?" the feminine voice asked. A cool breeze accompanied her as she stole into the room using the main door, which she shut firmly behind her.

Robb kept his eyes closed, but a small smile stretched across his lips. "Maybe I am. Do you care to warm me up?"

The woman snorted. "Does that line work?"

Robb frowned. Déjà vu, a term he learned from Luna, stole his breath for a moment and his eyes opened. The words, the setting - it was so familiar that at once fear turned his blood to ice and the warm bath was suddenly ice-cold.

What if this is another dream? He wondered, instantly transported back to when he dreamed of Hermione entering his rooms, a long time ago. What if I'm still at Hogwarts-

When he didn't reply, remaining shock-still, the feminine voice asked, quietly, "Robb?"

There was silence, but he heard the fabric of her clothes whisper and rustle as she moved close to him, walking gently across the stone floor and rugs until she was beside him. "Robb, what's wrong?"

He felt the air displace as she knelt, and then her cool fingertips ran down from his left shoulder to his hand, catching and spreading droplets of water over the light hair on his forearm.

Robb's eyes snapped open and his right hand reached across his body and tightly gripped Hermione's hand. He pulled until they were nose to nose, his blue eyes staring into her amber ones.

"Is this a dream?" he asked, his voice low.

Hermione slowly shook her head. "I'm here. I'm right here." She reached for his free-dangling left hand and gently brought it to her cheek, letting it rest there. "See? You can feel me. I'm real."

The King sighed and his eyes slid closed as his tight grip on her hand loosened. Instead, he laced their fingers together.

"You keep me grounded," he murmured in the quiet of his grandfather's bedroom. "You remind me what's real and what's not - and I need that."

"You thought I wasn't real?" asked Hermione, her voice quiet.
He nodded, opening his eyes to look at her. "I dreamed this before-"

"Oh, did you?" she teased and grinned at him.

He rolled his eyes. "Wench."

"Hey, now-!

A smile pulled at his lips and he leaned forward until their foreheads were touching. Her curly hair was beginning to frizz and dampen from the steam rising from his bath. He didn't even care that she could see all of him, under the water; all he cared about was that she was here and he could touch her.

He sighed. "I'm glad you're here. So glad."

She paused, and then said, even quieter than before, "I'm not going anywhere, Robb."

His eyes locked on her amber ones, and then he did what he had wanted to do for over a year now since his fascination with her grew to such a point that he could no longer deny himself: he closed the minute distance between their lips to taste her.

She tasted like sweet wine and the chill of a morning frost, but her lips were warm and moved across his slowly. He took his time, teasing out their kiss, sipping at her like a delicacy before leaning his head and pulling her closer to the edge of the tub to deepen the kiss.

He felt her flounder for a moment and then reach behind him to hold herself up with her free hand, clutching the back lip of his tub. He let his hand slide from her cheek to the back of her hair and held her in the perfect position to nip at her lips, soothe them, and then dive back in.

Hermione, for her part, was matching him; she'd taste and retreat, and playfully nip, but she was the bold one who licked at him, eager to deepen their kiss. With a low noise, Robb struggled to rise to his knees in the tub and slipped, water slooshing over the side and soaking the bottom of Hermione's trousers.

She laughed.

But Robb took one look at her lap, looked up with eyes that had darkened to a midnight blue, and huskily said, "We'd best get you out of those before you catch your chill."

Hermione gulped, knowing she should feel chilled from the open window, but her blood was on fire.

Something heavy fell over the two of them then, and she slowly rose from where she knelt next to the tub to stand at her full height while Robb matched her move for move.

Water sluiced down his body, covered with scars and cuts, trailing through his chest hair and down to hard abs and- Hermione's eyes shot back up, catching Robb's hungry stare.

He stepped out of the tub, taking a few steps toward her until they were chest to chest, but he didn't touch her. Instead, he leaned his head down, eyes half-lidded as he surveyed her flushed face, breathing in the same air.

"Is this okay?" he asked, quietly.

Hermione nodded. "Yes."

Robb reached up and pushed some of her hair off her shoulder. "I've wanted this for a long time."
He paused and then corrected himself, "I've wanted you for a long time."

Hermione's eyelashes fluttered as he leaned closer, his nose brushing against her cheek before ghosting over her lips. "Me too," she admitted breathlessly.

She felt his lips curl into a smile, and then he was kissing her again. This time, it was hungry, impatient, and Hermione wrapped her arms up over his shoulders and pulled him down, hard, against her, feeling the length of his body press against her and soaking her shirt in the process.

He huffed a laugh against her lips, and then they were both fumbling, hands knocking into each other as she struggled to yank her jumper up and over; then his hands were reaching for her camisole, and hers went to her jeans button, and then she was toeing off her shoes.

They stumbled backward, full of breathless laughter until she hit the bed, pulling him down with her. There was no more talking after that.

Later, when the sun was beginning to dip, Robb, propped up on his side, trailed his hand down Hermione's naked back, admiring the sheen and colour against the light from the fire in the hearth. The bed sheets rode low, barely covering the swell of her bottom.

"You did a good job, setting up the council of Lords," he said quietly. "I think I'll keep it going forward."

"Good," murmured Hermione sleepily, turning her head to face him. She then pressed back down into the pillow and stifled a yawn. "They're doing a good job and it's giving them more of a sense of unity."

"Mm," agreed Robb, eyes following the up and down sweep of his hand.

"That tickles," she admonished, but the tiny smile on her lips betrayed her.

"What about this? Does this tickle?" he asked, a glint in his eyes as he leaned down and his lips brushed the small of her back.

She bit back a moan, unsuccessfully.

"And this?" murmured Robb, his lips trailing up, until he was mouthing her shoulder and gathering her hair in his other hand, away from her face. "What about this?"

His mouth captured hers, and Hermione smiled against his lips, rolling a bit onto her back as he leaned over her.

"We haven't had that talk you wanted," reminded Hermione, a few minutes later, and far more awake.

Robb sighed and fell on his back next to her, one arm above his head. "'Suppose not. But I'm more concerned about this issue at the Wall. Lord Bolton and Lord Karstark both showed me the letter Lady Mormont sent, and Lord Cerwyn explained some of the other issues - but really, Hermione? Wights? A missing Commander?"

"That's why we were going to go," she replied, shrugging her shoulders. Robb's eyes dropped from her face to her chest. "Oh, excuse me, your highness - my face is up here."

"Sorry," he muttered, but he didn't sound it.
Hermione rolled her eyes and slid down the bed, cuddling into Robb's side while his free arm curled under, and then around her shoulders. "It's important," she said to him, her voice low. "There's something - in the air - can't you feel it? The Wall is important. The ward stones protect the Riverlands and the North right now. The South - that war is… not done, but it is on hold. There's something brewing to the north."

Robb frowned, but he agreed, despite not speaking it aloud. He too had sensed something off when the men were speaking. The strange magic that transported him to Britain, and even bringing Hermione to Westeros; the use of her magic which was so different to that of Harry and her other friends' - especially with how much she wasn't using her wand - it bothered him.

It was almost as magic was returning to Westeros.

A very cold gust of air blew through the room, and both he and Hermione shivered. He reached to the foot of the bed and drew the heavy furs up, tucking the corners in around her body as his frown deepened and his eyes tripped toward the open window.

The snow was falling harder.

In the end, Robb only amended parts of Hermione's original plan: he, along with his guard, Hermione, Brienne, Jaime (and wasn't that a surprise, reading the transcript notes from the man's confession), the eldest Mormont girl Lyra, and the Lords Bolton, Blackwood, Karstark and his Great-Uncle were joining him with a handful of foot soldiers as the first wave to Castle Black. The rest of the army would follow a full day behind, moving slower and to serve as reinforcements if they were needed at the Wall, which Robb doubted.

Sansa and Arya were rather miffed about being left behind, but Robb was adamant, despite lingering unease at the idea of leaving two members of his pack behind. However, the glower on Arya's face made him reconsider, and a part of him acknowledged that it was likely they'd sneak in with the main host, especially given the looks Sansa was sending to not only Eddard Karstark (when did that happen? He wondered) but Sandor Clegane, as well!

He and Hermione rode side-by-side at the front of the group of a hundred or so, quietly passing back and forth information to catch the other up on what was missed. Robb was sure Hermione was glossing over things - but the pained look in her eyes when she spoke of Torrhen's death, and his mother and Dacey's disappearance - had him bite his tongue. As they spoke, Robb felt his connection to Grey Wind, who loped in and out of the forest on either side of their trail, hunting for food or playfully jumping into snow banks, stretch, in ebbs and flows depending on how far his faithful direwolf went from the small host.

By the second week, Robb was recounting to Hermione, and their guards around them, a humorous anecdote of one Ron Weasley finding a squishy transfigured rat in his pocket (placed there by George). There was elation in his chest when Hermione threw back her head and laughed.

"-Now, of course, Ron didn't know it at the time," grinned Robb, leaning forward in his saddle toward Hermione, "But Harry was in on the whole thing."

"No!" she giggled, a hand covering her mouth. They were almost at Mole Town, and he wanted to distract her from the furrow her brows made from her worry about what they would find at Castle Black.

"Yes!" rejoined Robb. "So when Ron turned to Harry, who was sitting there in Grimmauld, barely keeping his face even, he opened his mouth and went-"
"GET DOWN!"

It was someone at the rear who shouted, and Robb turned his head in time to catch sight of an arrow whiz past, aimed at Hermione.

No!

But she had already moved, swinging her leg over the saddle to face the threat. Her wand was up and the arrow bounced off a silent protego, spinning off into the snow.

"Wildlings!" someone else shouted, and then several large figures were bursting from the tree line, war cries screaming from their mouths.

With grim determination, Robb drew the sword of Gryffindor from his sheath and wheeled his horse around. Perhaps he was too hasty in dismissing what he heard from his Lords and Hermione regarding Castle Black, but the thought was instantly banished from his mind, focused only on the here and now as a skinny, wild-eyed man raced toward him.

The sword swung down, cleanly decapitating the wildling and dropping the body, staining the snow around red. Robb turned in the saddle and glanced around, but there were only a few figures remaining, and some, cursing, disappeared into the trees, heading north.

"They're going to Mole Town," said an astonished Karstark, his own blade out but not bloodied. "Should we follow, Your Grace?"

As one of the soldiers finished off the last wilding, Robb realized that there were fewer than ten who attacked, and most were archers of some kind.

"I-" Robb stopped and wheeled his horse to face north, toward Castle Black. The sun began its descent and in the distance, smoke was staining the horizon black. Dread settled low in his stomach as the realization sank in: Castle Black was under attacked… from the wildings on the southern side of the wall.

Robb's eyes met Hermione's. The amber was brightly lit against the flush the cold air gave her skin, but her face was somber as she regarded the Northern King. Her wand was out and her hand, clenched tightly against the wood, flexed slightly. The tip pulsed with a held spell that was not yet cast, but she was ready to do battle.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw the rest of his men looking at him for their orders. Robb stiffened in the saddle and tilted his chin up.

"Ready your blades," he called, his voice carrying through the air. "Prepare for battle!"

Then he turned his horse again, facing north, and urged it into a gallop. Castle Black was under attack, and he was not going to abandon his half-brother on the wall for anything.

TBC...
A few hours earlier…

It was a dry cold that bit into Jon's cheeks, the kind that seeped down into your bones and made everything ache. He thought, after almost two years on the Wall, that he would be used to it, but he never did. In fact, if he could even measure such a thing, he thought he felt colder than normal.

"What was she like?"

Jon turned to face Sam, confusion on his face as his best friend asked a question from nowhere as they walked along the top of the Wall, checking battlements and skirting around people rushing back and forth with barrels of oil.

It took Jon a moment to realize what Sam was asking and he nearly cursed. "I don't want to talk about this," he thought mulishly. But with Sam peering at him, Jon sighed and said, "She...she had red hair."

Sam looked at him blankly for a moment before saying, sarcastically, "Oh? How big were her feet?"

Frustrated, Jon pursed his lips. "What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to tell me what it was like to have someone, to be with someone, to love someone and have them love you back," replied Sam, his voice growing stronger as he spoke. The two stopped walking and looked at one another. "We're all gonna die a lot sooner than I planned. You're the closest I'll ever get to knowing."

Jon's brow furrowed. "So you and Gilly never…?"

Sam blushed, looked away and shook his head. "No. She just had a baby. And she never offered."

"But if she had, you would have? You would have broken your vows?" Curiosity tinged Jon's voice, as well as some form of hope. If he was not the only Brother to break his vows… if he wasn't alone in his thoughts towards Ygritte... mayhaps he would not feel his shame as strongly.

A small quirk of his lips on his round face made Jon instantly wary. He had learned to recognize that mischievous look on the Tarly. "The interesting thing is our vows never specifically forbid intimate relations with women."

Jon stared. "What?"

Sam sent him a wicked grin and repeated their well-known vow. "'I shall take no wife.' Yes, that's in
there, there's no denying that. 'I shall father no children.' It's very specific. But what our vows have to say about other activities is open to interpretation."

Jon's eyes skittered away from Sam's in complete shock as his heart beat faster. The Seven Kingdoms didn't recognize spouse-stealing as a form of marriage. Technically, he and Ygritte weren't married in the eyes of Westeros. He hadn't broken his vows...!

But then he saw Alliser Thorne, barking orders further down the Wall, clad in his black leather and his thin curls from his receding hairline wavering in the slight chilly breeze, and Jon sighed. "I don't think Ser Alliser cares much for interpretation."

Sam shrugged. "Anyway, there's nothing for him to interpret. We didn't." He nudged Jon a bit. "So what's it like?"

Jon sighed again, louder and longer, and his thoughts turned inward. "It's...there's this person, this whole other person, and you're wrapped in them, they're wrapped up in you, and... you... for a little... for a little while you're more than just you, you're..." He trailed off, his face a furious red as he caught sight of Sam's rather hopeful and amused eyes. "Well, I don't know, I'm not a bleeding poet!"

"No, you're really not," agreed Sam easily.

"Anyway, what did I get for it? An arrow six inches from my heart," groused Jon.

The mood quickly shifted and swung from talks of love to talks of war. They started walking again, and Sam's voice was quiet when he said, "They'll be arrows for all of us soon, I imagine."

"There will."

"They've already done the worst thing to me they can ever do."

Jon grimaced. "Go get some sleep, Sam. I'll take this watch."

Sam nodded, a resigned look on his face as he turned to walk back the way they had come, toward the elevator shaft. Jon watched him go, his form easily disappearing into the gloom of the evening and the few flickers of the torches that lined the top of the wall.

He spent some time conversing with the Brothers on the Wall, checking provisions until he had all his numbers and facts, and then headed to Thorne.

"That's the last of the oil, Ser Alliser," said Jon as he approached. The other man was staring out to the north, eyes firmly fixed on the bush fire that was spreading and growing quickly.

"A hundred thousand, you say?"

Jon nodded. "Yes, sir."

Thorne's mouth twisted. "You can say it if you like. We should have sealed the tunnel while we had the chance, like you suggested."

"It was a difficult decision either way, sir," replied Jon diplomatically, trying to keep any judgment from his voice as he spoke.

Thorne snorted, the lines on his face deepening. "Do you know what leadership means, Lord Snow?"

The man glanced at Jon from the corner of his eyes, and Jon shook his head, silently waiting for the
man to continue. He knew when to speak and keep quiet.

"It means that the person in charge gets second guessed by every clever little twat with a mouth. But if he starts second guessing himself, that's the end. For him, for the clever little twats, for everyone," said Thorne, his mouth pressing into a hard line. He squared his shoulders. "But this is not the end. Not for us. Not if you lot do your duty for however long it takes to beat them back." He turned to look at Jon straight in the eye. "And then you get to go on hating me, and I get to go on wishing your Wildling whore had finished the job."

"Yes, ser!" replied Jon, knowing that was the correct answer.

"Good. Then let's kill some Wildlings," said Thorne, turning away and moving to take position at a better vantage point.

Those on the Wall fell quiet then, nervous energy pulsing off them as they stood at their posts, bows in hand and a ready arrow in the other to nock, or those standing by the caskets of oil and linen. The air chilled further as the evening wore on, and nothing could be heard at the top of the Wall except the harsh pants of the men, the crackle of the flames in the torches, and the high whistle of the cold wind. Flecks of snow drifted past, catching on clothing and wetting it briefly before freezing.

There was nothing but them and the cold expanse in front of them for several long moments. The flames licked at the wood and grew until it was a large bonfire, casting an eerie orange glow on the horizon. The scent of burning sap and wood wafted across the wind toward the Wall.

Then, somewhere down below, far away, a horn blew.

Slowly, black spots of varying sizes began to emerge from the closest treeline to the Wall; first it was only a few spots, and then more, and more, and more, until there were dozens upon dozens in staggering lines walking steadily toward them, bobbing torch lights with them. Faint shouts drifted to them.

Jon shifted uneasily as he watched the numbers increase

Thorne clenched his jaw. "Archers, nock! Everyone else, hold!"

From down the line, Brothers of the Night's Watch nocked their arrows, drawing the strings back as they held their position, picking a target in the far distance. As they did so, Grenn and Edd Tollett's cold hands slipped on the barrel they were rolling, filled with pitch, and they stared, horrified, as it rolled over the edge of the wall and bounced down, disappearing.

Thorne grimaced. His hand, which was raised to signal the archers, fell to the side and Jon watched him take a deep breath for patience. He then turned to glare at them for a moment, and then he looked around and realized the archers had drawn and were holding their positions with shaking arms. "I said 'nock and hold,' you cunts! Does 'nock' mean 'draw'?"

Chastised, the men around him replied in chorus. "No, ser!"

Sensing the morale growing, Thorne continued. "Does fucking 'hold' mean fucking 'drop'?"

"No, ser!"

"You all plan to die here tonight?"

"No, ser!"
There was satisfaction in Throne's voice and a small smile on his mouth as he said, "That's very good to hear! Draw!"

As one, the archers drew back their arrows and held position. A horn blast caught them off guard, and Thorne and Jon turned quickly to their lookout, higher than them, in confusion.

That Brother shook his head and shouted, "No! They're down below!"

"What?" gapped Jon. He turned to Thorne, eyes wide. "They're attacking the South Gate - Sam's down there! They're coming from both sides of the Wall!"

As he spoke, Janos Slynt slid forward, wheeling his arms a bit to keep from sliding on the slippery surface of the Wall. "They're attacking the South Gate! Right now!"

Thorne grit his teeth. "Now?"

Slynt nodded in agreement, his voice grating as he repeated the word. "Now!"

With everyone staring at Thorne, Jon could see that he was making those decisions he spoke of to Jon; his eyes cut to the young Snow, and then he muttered. "I'm going down there." He turned to Slynt. "You have Command of the Wall."

Everyone stared as Thorne quickly strode toward the elevator, leaving the rest to gape at Slynt, who was equally befuddled at begin given the job. He stared around for a long moment.

When no one moved, Thorne turned and shouted, "What are you fucking waiting for?! LOOSE!"

The men who had their arrows drawn released, cutting through the air as fiery streaks. They hit a few targets, but the Wildling line stepped back to be out of range.

Slynt nervously looked around and waved his hand. "Well? Get on with it! Fire again!"

Jon sighed, watching as the men around him fumbled and loosed their arrows at different times, each failing to meet their mark due to the distance the Wildlings were keeping. It was just wasted ammunition at this point.

"Again!"

And again, the same thing happened. Jon clenched his hands at his side and cut his eyes at Slynt, who was pacing nervously behind the line, his face flickering in and out of the light from the torches.

Nearby, Grenn and Edd looked from Slynt to Jon, but Jon could not say anything; Thorne did not put him in charge. He was still just a second, aiding Slynt.

Below, the line began to move forward, including several large, lumbering shapes.

Slynt's reedy voice broke across the men as some fired at will, and others just watched, unsure of what to do. "No discipline. No training. Gang of thieves, that's all this is!"

A few of the Brothers scowled at the man.

"I was part of the City Watch in King's Landing! Those men obeyed orders," the man whined.

Jon rolled his eyes, sending the man's back a dirty look as he stepped forward. "We can't just let them attack the gate!"
"The bars of those gates are four inches of cold, raw steel-"

"Those are giants, riding mammoths down there! Do you think your cold, raw steel is going to stop them?" shouted back Jon.

Slynt stared at Jon and replied, passively, "There's no such thing as giants-"

Behind, Jon saw Grenn mouth "what?" to Edd, and then square his jaw as he stood and wandered down the Wall. In confusion, Jon watched him before turning back to Slynt, who was staring down at the north end of the wall and the approaching line of the Wildling army.

"-those are stories for children," the man was still speaking.

"Brother Slynt!"

Both Jon and Slynt turned to a breathless Grenn as he approached.

"We just got word that Ser Alliser needs you below," continued Grenn. Jon's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, but as Slynt turned to him, he snapped his mouth shut. "You're the most experienced man we've got, he needs you!"

It was easy to read Slynt's face in that moment; he warred between pride and he needs me?; and fear and I don't want to go down there!. But for all his talk of discipline, order, and obedience, Slynt swallowed and said, "Needed below? Yes..." and made to leave.

Grenn and Jon watched him, as did the others on the Wall until he was out of sight. Then, all eyes turned to Jon.

_Do you know what leadership means, Lord Snow?_ Thorne's voice echoed in his mind and Jon blinked once, twice before swallowing and firming his mouth into a tight line. He turned away from the south and focused on the invaders below. "Archers! Nock your arrows!"

He raised his arm. "Draw-" and then dropped his quickly. "LOOOOOOOSE!"

Below, the flaming arrows hit their targets, and the men seemed to take confidence in the action as Jon began walking along the back. "Harnesses! Grab your bows! We need to thin them from climbing!"

Jon repeated the commands as two men hung over the extended walkway, their arrows aimed vertically down at the climbers, struggling to hold their breaths against the leather that creaked in the cold and wind.

Things seemed to be going well for them until a harpoon-like arrow smashed through the roof of one of their extended walkways, sending wood flying everywhere. Edd ducked and covered his face with his arms as Jon stepped forward and peered down the edge.

"Shite," he swore, and then shouted, "DUCK!"

But the warning came too late, as another large arrow sailed past and impaled one of the men on the walkway to Jon's left. All heads swivelled and watched as the man screamed, sailing over the southern end of the wall and down below, toward Castle Black.

Jon turned back, facing the northern army, and scowled. _I hope Thorne has things in hand below. Things can't get worse than they already are._
They led the horses in a full gallop toward the southern gate of Castle Black, Robb at the lead with Hermione by his side. Castle Black was not large, but it had a sense of sprawling foreverness to it: there was a wooden gate with two watchtowers on either side facing Mole's Town; inside, the Castle was built out of either wood or stone. The stone castle was the largest, and tallest, of the buildings, etched directly into the wall and off to the right. Around it was several wooden buildings of only one or two storeys, most connected by wooden catwalks or covered walkways, and sometimes attached by a two-storey stone structure that doubled as something else. All roofs were covered with thatched grass, hay, or rushes of some sort, and a few were on fire.

Hermione's eyes were forward and fixed on the battlements just slightly above the gate - the two wooden towers on either side where the Wildlings were climbing in and the few black-clad figures that were screaming as they were pushed out.

Robb knew what she was going to do a split second before she did it; he turned and his mouth began, "Hermione-no-!" But she had already let go of the reins and swung one leg over the saddle so she was sitting sideways - but she continued and used the momentum to turn in place, and then disappeared with a pop.

Swearing, Robb whipped his head around and focused forward, looking all over the towers at the base of the castle for spellfire, but he saw nothing. He swore again, louder, and then shouted, "TO ME! EVERYONE, TO ME!"

As they thundered toward the gate, he saw some of the Wildlings from the back turn in surprise and then try to rally a meagre defense, some holding up their swords and two archers beginning to nock their arrows.

Yet, Robb and his wolfpack guards and Lords behind smashed into the few Wildlings, sending a few of them tumbling as their horses knocked them flying; one crumpled to the ground and was trampled, while another hit a frozen snow bank.

Using their continued momentum, Robb directed them at the gate, which smashed open as they burst through, sending wood and a few barrels that were being used to prop the door closed from behind flying. They rode into the courtyard quickly, and Robb wheeled his horse around, drawing the sword of Gryffindor and slashing down at the first screaming figure that ran toward him.

The Wildling blocked his attack, and then hacked forward, aiming not for Robb but his horse; he didn't see the flash of sword in the darkness but heard his horse's cry and it then reared back and he tumbled down from the seat, landing on his knees. He sprung up quickly and blocked a downward swing from the same Wildling who now ignored his bleeding and dying horse.

Gritting his teeth, Robb pushed forward with all his strength and shoved his sword toward the Wildling pressing down on him. The man stumbled back, surprise on his face.

Then -

A grey streak rushed at the man, knocking him to the ground. He screamed, dropping his sword and bringing his hands up to push the bloodied muzzle off from him and his neck, but he died with a gurgle as Grey Wind ripped his throat open, spraying blood everywhere.

When his direwolf looked up, Robb could swear there was intelligence in him - and so Robb did the only thing he could think of. He said, "Good wolf!" in a praising voice.

And Grey Wind sat on his haunches and replied with a doggy smile, his tail wagging behind him.
The moment was broken as a piercing cry from above - on one of the catwalks around the taller castle towers, caught Robb's attention.

_Stop messing around, Stark_, he thought with a mental shake, _you're in the middle of battle!_

So Robb raced forward, his sword in one hand and Grey Wind at the other, leaping and snarling at the nearest Wilding that came rushing to meet him in battle below the balcony. Robb raised his arm and slashed down, the blade of Gryffindor easily sliding through the Wildling's poor boiled leather armour and bit into the skin and muscle underneath. The man dropped.

The courtyard was in chaos; there were Wildlings climbing up and around the battlements, savagely and mercilessly beating down at any Night's Watch brothers they could find, hacking with short axes or blunted swords. Their numbers were numerous, even with Robb and his men joining the battle.

A loud thud caught Robb's attention and he turned to see a man laying on a pile of hay, groaning. He had one hand pressed tight to his midsection; blood glittered in the flickering torchlight.

"Who're you?!" shouted a man with a ferocious scowl as he looked up and caught Robb gapping at him.

They were both distracted as a bunch of black brothers came forward and caught the other man under his arms, hauling him up.

Robb was about to answer when a screaming woman came at Robb from the side. In response, he viciously slashed with his sword and then thrust into the woman's neck, the sword coming through on the other side, bloody.

"Robb Stark, King in the North," replied Robb, turning back to the three men - the one who had fallen, and the two hauling him up - evenly; around him, his wolfpack were taking on their own opponents fiercely. He saw Bolton, with a grim look on his face but eyes alight, as his sword efficiently worked through his enemies. "You?"

The man scowled. "Ser Alliser Thorne."

_Ah_, thought Robb. Then his attention was diverted by another man screaming, running toward him. Robb met the first blow, blocking the Wildling's attempt, parried, and slid his foot back as he pushed up, disarming the man's sword and sending it flying away.

The Wildling snarled in fury and then launched forward for a bare-handed attack, but Robb caught him mid-leap with his sword sticking out of the man. The sword of Gryffindor slid easily back out and the man sputtered blood from the corner of his mouth before turning an ill green colour and falling, dead.

Behind, he could hear Thorne shouting, even as he was pulled away, "Hold the fucking gate! _Hold it!_"

Robb cast his blue eyes around the courtyard, trying to find Hermione. He couldn't make out her curly brown hair anywhere in the area. Panic began to bubble in his throat. Where was she? Where had she Apparated to?

A few paces away, Edd savagely slashed his Wildling enemy in two, bisecting him at the waist and watched dispassionately as the man's innards spilled before turning away, looking for his next opponent with grim determination.

"Edd!" the King called.
The Karstark looked up. "Your Highness?"

"Where's Hermione?"

Edd frowned, paused, and looked around. As he did so, he scanned the general area and Robb saw his mouth turn down into a scowl as he realized the witch had disappeared. He turned back to his King.

Robb, too, fought the urge to scowl; Hermione was rather wilful and tended to go where she pleased - and, to be fair, a battle wasn't the place to stop and check in with someone to tell where they were about to go.

"Find her!" commanded Robb. "And when you find her, stick to her like she's the snitch, would you?"

"I-what?"

Edd's bewildered expression made Robb pause and think about what he just said, wondering what was confusing about his orders. Then, replaying the words back in his mind, he mentally groaned. This is what happens when I spend nearly a year with Quidditch-nuts wizards and witches.

"Just-" frustration made Robb growl. He pointed at Edd and wagged his finger a bit. "Just find her and don't leave her side!"

"Your Majesty," nodded Edd, and then he turned into the crowd, slipping between men wearing black - the Night's Watch - and Wildlings in all their different coloured clothes and leathers. Robb needed a vantage point - he needed to see more of what was happening to make the best decision going forward. He had to trust Edd to find Hermione.

Nearby, the base of the elevator shaft reached a platform with two sets of stairs leading up. Robb glanced around and then, keeping his back bent and low, raced across the churned, muddy ground to the stairs and then took them two at a time, throwing himself to the side behind some barrels as an arrow whizzed past his ear.

He collided with someone.

Both expelled loud "oofs!" and Robb quickly rolled, rising to his knee and foot with the sword's blade parallel with the ground as he pointed it at the round-faced man in black in front of him. The young man's eyes widened and the crossbow in his hands trembled.

"My apologies," muttered Robb, dropping the sword so it pointed down.

"T-That's fine," the other man stuttered.

A clank caught their attention as a group of five brothers exited the elevator shaft and threw themselves to the barrels to their left, avoiding any potential arrows aimed in their direction. The leader was a man with a bushy beard and a square face, one that was filled with determination. The others with him were peering around the barrels at the chaos below.

"Grenn! We need more men down here!" the Black brother beside Robb shouted over the noise. "Even with the reinforcements we received-"

"What reinforcements?" the man - Grenn - asked, scrunching his face up in confusion.

"His!" the other brother said, pointing at Robb. He looked the young King up and down, frowning.
"Who're you?"

"You know, I'm getting asked that a lot tonight," he muttered, but then cleared his throat and said, "Robb Stark, King-"

"Robb! Jon's brother!" the round-faced brother exclaimed, voice happy.

"The King in the North?" added Grenn, eyes wide. "What are you doing here?" Then he frowned. "Wait - I thought you were dead-?"

Robb glanced between the two. "What? No! I'm alive - and, er - we received a raven asking for help…?"

"Fucking good timing, I'll say!" Grenn laughed. "How many are with you?"

"Well - myself, my guard, a few of the other Lords, and Hermione of course," rattled off Robb, frowning. "My army is about a day's pace behind."

Determination fell on Grenn's face. "We can hold until then. We have to hold until then." He then shook his head and looked at the other brother. "Jon told us to hold the gate. We have to hold the gate."

"We need more men here," stressed the other brother.

Grenn snapped, "Tell Jon that, then! He's in Command!" he turned to the four others behind him and hefted his axe. "Let's go!"

Then he, and those with him were rushing down the steps and across the courtyard, their swords and axes knocking away any of the enemy's as they ignored the fight to get to the far building - which, presumably, led to the gate.

"What gate are they talking about?" asked Robb, turning back to the other man.

"The Northern gate," the brother replied. "The Wildlings have a mammoth and giants. They're probably going to stop them from coming in."

Robb pursed his lips. "Very well. I'll gather some of my guards and we'll go with them."

The young man's round eyes widened further. "Your Highness-!"

"You're going to see Jon, right?"

The other man nodded.

"Tell him we're here, then, will you?" Robb shifted into a squat and then paused. He turned back to the brother. "And if he sees a witch, let her do her thing!"

"Ah- a what?" he heard the brother call, but Robb was then launching himself across the open platform to the far stairs and then pounding down them, slashing at the first unfriendly face he came across. Looking around, and noticing a turn to the battle, Robb called loudly above the crashes of swords and the cries of those around him, "Wolfpack! To me!"

Grey Wind howled somewhere in the courtyard. There was an echoing howl from those around him - Robb turned, bewildered, to see Patrek Mallister had his head thrown back, howling along with Grey Wind; and then Lucas Blackwood and Wendyl Manderley copied him. The next moment, finishing their howls, Blackwood and Mallister were at his side, breathing heavily with bloodied
swords. Lucas had a gash on his forehead but was ignoring it, and Patrek had a wide grin on his face.

"Your Grace?" Mallister asked breathlessly.

"We're going to the northern gates below," instructed Robb, mentally putting away anything he was going to say regarding Mallister's urge to howl with Grey Wind. "We need to hold the gate with a few of the Night's Watch brothers."

Blackwood nodded. "Understood, your Highness."

The three of them began to edge their way around the fringe of the battles in the courtyard. A few times, Robb had a duck from an arrow or flying debris, but slowly the overall chaos that permeated the battle was beginning to ebb as Robb's army contingent - small as it was - overtook their opponents with skill and precision.

"You!" shouted Robb, pointing at a Night's Watch brother leaning against a wall, panting with a hand pressed to his side.

The grim-looking man looked up.

"Which way to the northern gate?" continued Robb.

The man jerked his head. "Inside, and then down the first left. Straight from there."

Robb nodded and turned to Mallister and Blackwood. "Ready?"

"Yes, Your Grace!" both replied, and the grim man's face melted into shock as the three turned and entered the softly-lit interior of the castle. Following the man's instructions, Robb ignored the flickering of fading torches and turned left.

Distantly, he heard a roar. Around them, the walls trembled, and bits of dust and plaster fell from the ceiling.

"What was that?" whispered Blackwood, freezing.

"I think that was a giant," replied Mallister with a wild look in his eyes.

Robb squared his shoulders and lifted his blade. "Prepare yourselves."

Robb began down the narrow passage, stepping over bits of rotted wood on the ground and around provisions in barrels. There were several wooden frames jutting out from the walls at intervals - to hold the passage - but each trembled as a heavy clang echoed through the space.

Ahead, Robb could see a cluster of brothers by an inner gate, and beyond, was a figure that was picking up speed and running closer.

"-wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post-!"

The other brothers were joining in, their voices rising with conviction and strength as they spoke their oaths. "I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the shield that guards the realms of men. I pledge my life and honor to the Night's Watch, for this night and all the nights to come!"

And with a shout, the giant slammed into the gate, denting it.
The giant rammed it again, and the gate splintered, sending sharp shards of steel everywhere. One impaled one of the brothers too slow to dodge it and keep presence of mind as the giant roared again and reached forward, snatching another brother and pulling.

The man screamed.

"Cooper!" shouted Grenn, thrusting his sword at the giant and slashing at whatever he could reach: the giant's ankles, his lower body, his legs. The others around him joined in.

"OUT OF THE WAY!" hollered Robb as he raced forward and then dropped, sliding along the cold, icy ground in between two the brothers who leaped sideways just as he appeared. On his knees, Robb caught and hooked his arm around the giant's lower leg and with his other hand, and his momentum drew Gryffindor's sword along the tendons at the back. He sliced through the leather boot and the muscle just above the ankle bone.

The giant roared again, tossing the man he had like a ragdoll into the wall, where he left a bloody smear as he slid down and collapsed. The giant then tried to take a step forward but stumbled. Robb was now behind the large creature.

"Your Grace!" shouted Mallister, dodging a fist.

Robb grunted in response but levelled his sword and went for the other ankle, determined to bring the giant down. Already he could see him slowing, the poison from the blade working its way through the giant's blood. With a slash, Robb cut deeply through the boot, through skin and muscle on the opposite ankle. The giant roared again, this time in pain more than anger, and turned at the waist to look at Robb.

It shouted something - in probably the Old Tongue - and made an aborted attempt to step toward Robb. It faltered and stumbled, unable to support its weight.

"Easy now," murmured Robb, slowly backing up but keeping his eyes on the giant. "Easy…"

The giant fell flat on his front, crying out.

A tiny part of Robb twinged in compassion, but as the giant focused its eyes on him, anger and rage burning in them, Robb pushed those emotions aside. Grenn, one of the other brothers, and Blackwood darted forward, each picking a part of the giant's back and shoving their swords straight down, piercing through the layers of clothing the giant wore.

The giant groaned, trying to uselessly swat at the three on his back; Mallister grabbed one of the arms, the right, and the other standing black brother joined him. Both wrapped their arms and shoved down with their upper bodies, slamming to the cold floor as they kept the arm from flailing.

"Keep 'im still!" shouted Grenn.

"I'm trying!" one of the brothers shouted back.

Robb took the opportunity and stepped forward, next to the giant's head. Extremely weakened, and dying from the basilisk poison on the blade, Robb stared down at the man. His face was long, Northern in feature, but he had a blunted, flattened nose and narrow, small eyes. Tears gathered at the corner of those eyes now - from frustration, anger, or realization, Robb wasn't sure.

Instead, he quietly and slowly raised his sword with both hands above his head, and swiftly brought it down on the giant's neck, severing the head from its body in one smooth stroke. Blood spurted and Robb turned his head away to keep it from getting on him or in his mouth.
The silence following the giant's death was deafening.

"Is it… is it over?" whispered one of the brothers.

Grenn sent the man a withering glare. "Its head is separate from its body, Hill - I'd imagine it's fucking dead."

There was a general sigh of relief from those who remained.

"Your Grace," began Mallister. "Should we return to the courtyard? To the battle?"

Robb nodded. "I need to find Hermione - she disappeared before we entered."

There was a slight twitch to Mallister's eyes and a vague look of alarm as he realized Hermione had given them the slip. The young man jerkily nodded his head in agreement.

"Who's Hermione?" asked one of the brothers, looking around.

Grenn shrugged. "Don't know, don't care. If they're fighting for us, that's all that I need to know."

"She is," confirmed Robb.

"Then what are we waiting for?" asked Grenn, turning to the others. He spared a glance at the fallen form of Cooper, pain spasming across his face briefly before he looked away. "Let's go kill some Wildlings!"

Hermione apparated in the left tower above the southern gate. Her pop was masked by the sounds of grunts, screams, cries, and the clanging of swords and axes as she appeared. But immediately, someone saw her arrival and turned to her, mouth open and eyes wide, their axe above their head, ready to swing down.

Hermione pursed her lips and pointed her wand at the man dressed in shabby, mismatched clothing layered on top of one another and thought expulso. The bright blue light burst from her wand, illuminating the interior of the dark tower for a moment, turning everything sapphire.

Then the spell connected with the man and he was blast backward, through the opening on the other side of the tower's catwalk, landing with a solid thump on the hard earth below, a gaping wound in his chest where the spell hit.

Slowly, Hermione turned her eyes to the next person.

They gulped and took a hesitant step back, before firming their resolve. Two other Wildlings - a woman and man - behind the first took up point on either side of the first man, the woman raising her axe and the man fingering the bladed edge of his sword, already wet with blood.

Hermione cast her eyes at the three of them, and then around. I have an idea… she thought, and cast a containment charm on the catwalk, locking them all in the space. There were a few other Wildlings further down, and one attempted to leave the tower but found themselves bouncing back from the containment charm in the doorway.

"What magic is this?!" that man scowled.

"It's my magic," replied Hermione, causing them to all look at her in confusion. "Enjoy."

"What-?!"
Hermione slashed her wand down, letting her magic bubble from her hand into the tip and crackle as white-hot lightning tinged with blue burst from the tip, skating across the floor and walls of the catwalk and towers, spreading further and further.

As it touched each Wildling, they screamed and writhed as the current passed through their bodies, making them arch and twist in grotesque ways. The smell of charred flesh soon overpowered the tower and Hermione turned on her heel, Apparating out and tearing down her containment charm in one go.

She appeared in the courtyard and saw Robb and Grey Wind side-by-side. The direwolf was bloody, from his muzzle and down his front, including his paws, and Robb was wild-eyed, with his auburn hair dishevelled as he looked around.

From her side, a shrieking woman with a pick of some kind raced toward her, but she cast a mild look at the woman and raised her wand. A right light ripped from it, jagged and bright, and slammed into the woman's hand holding the pick. She screamed as her wrist disintegrated, slowly, the skin turning grey and ashy until she clutched at the stump of her head.

When she looked up, Hermione cast a severing charm across her throat and the woman fell back to the ground, eyes open in shock.

The battle in the courtyard was beginning to thin; Bolton was happily and slowly cutting his Wildling target, along the man's wrists and ankles; Karstark was wiping blood from his face and Blackwood and the Blackfish were making quick work of a Wildling with sunken eyes.

An arrow whizzed by Hermione's face and she jerked back, casting protego instinctively and watched it ping off the shield. She looked up at where it came from and met the wide eyes of a redhead who hastily dropped her next arrow and turned, fleeing from her perch: an open window from the castle's second floor, across the courtyard.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, and disapparated, landing on the window ledge. She wobbled precariously but slid down into the room, looking around.

It was dusty, dank and cold like everything else so far had been. The walls were wooden, and parts were rotted. There was a narrow desk and a cot, neither used if the amount of dust and debris on them were any indication of use.

Hermione took a tentative step forward and the floorboard creaked. She winced.

Now, where did you go? She wondered, edging forward slowly. Casting a spell on her feet to silence them wouldn't help, not when the floorboards themselves were buckled and rotted, but Hermione took her time to gingerly step and avoid areas she felt were the most cracked.

She inched her head around the doorway and saw the interior hallway, devoid of life. The sounds from outside were muted, dimmed like they were coming from underwater, and all Hermione could hear was her harsh breathing and the whoosh of blood as it coursed through her.

Her magic tingled, racing up and down her limbs to the point of pain, where her fingertips were going numb at withholding it in. It was strange; she had never felt that way before, the feeling of power pumping through her, nor the need to expel it quickly and violently.

Perhaps there is more magic here than I thought, she frowned, looking around the barren castle interior as she inched down the hall, wand held aloft and in a loose grip, ready to flick or slash.

Echoing, thumping footsteps from above had Hermione pause in her path. She tilted her head up and
strained her ears, her eyes following the sound as they moved down the hallway to the closed door ahead of her.

Hermione tapped herself on the head with her wand, disillusioning herself and blending into the dark wood walls, just as the door opened and a yellow-toothed, skinny man stepped in. It was a Wilding, dressed in his layered furs. He was clutching a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. Both were bloody.

With her eyes narrowed, Hermione stepped forward. A floorboard creaked and the man spun around, eyes flashing, and sword held up. But his eyes darted left and right as Hermione paused, perfectly blending in with the dark surroundings.

The man snarled and stepped forward until they were mere feet apart.

The nasty side of Hermione urged her forward, and she stopped a mere hand away from the man. He was breathing heavily, his breath putrid, and his pupils were shot, wide and wild as they looked around the hallway. He stunk of sweat, blood, gore, and other scents that Hermione did not want to think about.

With her wand held between their two bodies, midsection, Hermione allowed for the disillusion to drop.

The Wildling’s eyes widened, and he raised his dagger to pierce down-

But Hermione cast a spell first; the same purple-flash of Dolohov’s curse burst from her wand, hitting the man in a jagged, licking spellfire and the man collapsed soundlessly, his mouth gapping open and closed as he struggled to breathe as his organs were slowly crushed.

Hermione glanced down at him as she stepped over his prone body and went through the open door. She was beyond the first courtyard where the gates were, in another, long one that seemed to include the smithy, as there was a building with a tall smokestack. She leaned against the railing and peered down into the fighting, spotting Lyra with her dual blades fighting alongside Brienne with her sword.

Opposite of Hermione, along another building by a set of stairs, a Wildling man was staring open-mouthed at Brienne until an arrow lodged into his shoulder. He shouted something and went to turn, but a Black Brother coming down the stairs in front of him attracted his attention and he kicked at the man, sending back sprawling back onto the steps.

The brother blocked the large Wildling’s downward swing of his sword and Hermione turned her attention elsewhere, looking for that flash of red.

There!

The Wildling woman was shooting arrows down on the courtyard from a broken railing, crouched as she pulled from her quiver behind her back. Every arrow she rained down from above hit their targets, dropping the Night's Watch brother. They did not get up.

Frowning, Hermione turned on her heel and disapparated over. Her arrival was behind the redhead and masked by the sound of battle. The Wildling's hand was reaching behind for another arrow, so Hermione swished her wand and vanished them.

When her hand caught nothing, she turned around and gasped.

"Hello," said Hermione, giving her a little wave.
"Shit!" the redhead said, turning and tumbling headfirst over the edge of the wooden catwalk.

Hermione's mouth dropped open and she paused. Looking around, she wondered, *Am I really that scary?* but then blinked, and disapparated down to the courtyard, watching as the redhead landed on a sloped roof that she rolled from, only to land on her feet at Hermione's.

She tossed her head back, her hair pulled off her forehead in a tight braid with the rest swishing around her shoulders in riotous curls like Hermione's own, only to widen her eyes at Hermione. She glanced quickly behind her at where she had previously been, to where Hermione was now, her mouth open. "How-?"

"I took the stairs," deadpanned Hermione. "Cardio is important."

The redhead looked confused.

"Are you missing something?" continued Hermione, gesturing to the woman's quiver.

"It was you!" the young woman accused her, rising from her crouch. Her hand tightened around her bow in anger. "How did you-?!"

She let out a tiny screech of anger, eyes darting around. A few steps away, near a body against a piled snowbank was a half-full quiver.

Both women eyed it, standing still until the redhead turned on her heel and raced for them. Just as her fingers went to grasp the arrows, they flew out of reach, zooming past her head and over her shoulder. She turned to watch them, and her mouth dropped open as the arrows, all vertical and clustered, were caught in Hermione's free left hand.

"Keeping you from your preferred weapon is kind of a big deal right now," said Hermione, twisting her mouth into a wry expression. "Sorry."

"I don't need those," the Wildling woman replied, reaching her waist and pulling out a short dagger from its sheath.

"You don't need that, either," replied Hermione, and with a wave of her wand, the blade vanished too.

The woman stared down at her empty hand for a moment. When she looked back up at Hermione, she let out a loud shriek of anger and then launched herself forward.

The attack was unexpected, and Hermione was not expecting it when the young woman plowed into her and the two went sprawling onto the hard earth. Hermione hit the ground first, feeling a jagged piece of hardened mud poke into her back. She groaned.

The redhead began scrambling for the quivers still in Hermione's left hand, her cold fingers prying at Hermione's to open her fist.

Hermione rolled, throwing her weight at the other woman but with all her layered furs she was rather heavy, but it did force her to stop clawing at Hermione's hand. Her hair swung forward and into Hermione's face and mouth, causing her to sputter as the redhead reared back a fist.

The punch landed on Hermione's cheek, swinging her head around. She blinked in shock for a moment, staring wildly ahead at a curly-haired young man in all black as he swung his sword, only for the tall bald Wildling he was fighting to knock it away with a loud "yaaaaaargghhh!" as he swung his giant axe down.
The Night's Watch brother nimbly jumped back, but there was a look of panic on his face with each skip he made, with each swing of the axe coming closer and closer. He grabbed something from a nearby weapons rack and landed a smack on the larger man's cheek, and Hermione used her weight and momentum to swing back around, her wand up in the woman's face as she cast. "Reducto!"

The redhead had good reaction time, though, and jerked her head away. She was forced to roll off Hermione though, and the two scrambled up to their feet, Hermione with her back to the Night's Watch brother.

Hermione watched warily as the redhead's eyes trailed from her to the man behind fighting the Wildling. Her mouth flattened, and Hermione immediately shifted her position so it blocked sight of the fighting man. The redhead's eyes travelled back to her.

"You're fighting me first," Hermione said quietly.

"You have a weapon and I don't," she replied, glancing down at Hermione's wand.

Hermione's mouth turned down. "Then pick up those arrows." Her eyebrows rose. "But I warn you, it still won't be an even fight."

The woman scoffed. "For you?"

Hermione shook her head. "For you."

The two eyed each other warily a bit longer, but the young woman seemed to take Hermione's word and slowly crouched down, never removing her eyes from Hermione's as her hand extended and she groped a bit until she caught four arrows from the collection Hermione summoned. She quickly drew them toward her and stuck three in her quiver and one nocked in her bow.

Then, in a smooth movement that was a blur, she raised her bow and drew back, letting go and sending the arrow flying toward Hermione.

The arrow bounced off a silent protego shield, pinging off somewhere to the side.

Hermione took a step forward.

The redhead gaped for a moment, then snapped her mouth shut and heavily frowned, her eyebrows drawing down into a fierce V. She nocked another arrow and let it fly; again, Hermione blocked with her spell, stepping forward again.

Another arrow was drawn, leaving one left in her quiver.

Hermione shook her head as she stepped forward again, causing the Wildling to skitter back, the arrow pointed at Hermione but not released. "I could do this all day, you know."

The woman's mouth flattened, and she released the arrow; this time, Hermione allowed it closer, removing her shield-spell and instead knocked the arrow aside with a wind charm, sending it flying back toward the Wildling instead.

She ducked.

"One left," called Hermione, walking forward and crowding the woman until they were halfway across the courtyard, near a bloodied anvil.

The Wildling withdrew the last arrow, carefully and slowly nocked it, and drew the string back until
she was ready to release. She aimed it at Hermione, eyes dark and intense. The two stood still for a
long moment, and then the Wildling's eyes trailed over Hermione's shoulder and to the side, holding
on a figure.

Curious, Hermione turned, wand tight in her grip and saw the same curly-haired young man from
earlier, only this time covered in blood from several gashes on his forehead and cheek, as well as a
split lip. He too was staring at the redhead as he breathed heavily, his chest rising and falling quickly.

_Did she… did she just decide not to fight me anymore and go for this guy?_ wondered Hermione,
glancing between the two. But then she looked closer and saw the gutted look on the man's face -
partially resigned at his fate, but also accepting. He smiled at the redhead, nodding his head a bit.

Turning back to the woman, Hermione watched as she swallowed thickly and grit her teeth like she
was trying to convince herself to shoot the man. Her bow trembled and she smiled, although it was a
quick and fleeting thing-

_No._

Later, Hermione would wonder why she cared, what caused her to react given she had been fighting
the young Wildling woman as well as hunting her across the courtyard, but something in her
instinctively caused her to react, to move. Her wand swept up from her waist, curving into a perfect
arch as the snow around her - from the ground, from the snowbanks pushed to the side, from the air -
swirled together and consolidated into a thick sheet of frozen snow in front of the Wildling.

An arrow was caught in the frozen block, its tip on the other end and a scant inch from the Wildling's
chest. She was staring down at it with wide eyes, and she took a stumbled step back, away from
what would've been her death.

"Ygritte!"

The man rushed past Hermione and she turned to trace where the arrow came from. A young boy
stood on the stairs, a bow hanging by his side with a shocked look on his face as he looked at
Hermione.

She frowned and he turned, scrambling and tripping up the steps.

She disapparated and appeared on a few steps above him, staring down. He paused in his scramble
and looked up at her, fear on his face.

"That wasn't very nice," she said mildly, noting his black colours. _He's a Night's Watch brother. I
can't harm him. But I can take him out of this fight._ "Stupefy."

The boy crumpled on the steps. Hermione flicked her wand and levitated him off to the side, behind
some crates and cast a Notice-Me-Not on him. The fighting was still occurring in the courtyard, but
Karstark had pushed through from the inner courtyard. There was a slow but steady push from
Robb's forces against the Wildlings, but it was still taking time.

_It's taking too long_, thought Hermione with a frown. _I need to end this._

She looked up, eyes narrowed at the long elevator shaft that protruded from the slick white wall, its
top disappearing into the swirling snow and night sky.

"Hermione!"

Hermione glanced at who called her name, spotting Edd. He still had his sword but was leaning
heavily on one leg.

"Don't move!" the Karstark cautioned, beginning to limp his way toward her and dodging around small pockets of battles. "His Grace is looking for you!"

"Sorry, Edd," called Hermione in reply, making the man freeze. "But there's something I need to do."

"Hermione - what -"

But she looked up again, and then turned on her heel. When she reappeared, she was at the bottom of the elevator shaft, its doors hanging open and creaking slightly in the breeze. There was no one to begin the mechanism to take her up, so she would have to go up it herself.

A spell cast on the gear had it turning, and she stepped into the shaft just as it lifted from the platform. She stepped back until she stood in the middle, arms crossed and staring forward as she rose higher and higher. Soon, the men fighting below were nothing but black smudges disappearing into the gloom and blurring with the few fires lit around Castle Black.

The cold was biting the further up Hermione went. She shivered and eyed the covered ceiling of the shaft, wondering what the top of the wall was like. Snow swirled around her, some slipping down the neck of her overcoat.

The elevator reached its summit and Hermione stepped out, looking around. The top of the wall was wide, a good couple of meters with some covered stations and platforms dotting its edge to the north and away from the Castle. A few men were rushing back and forth along the path, but most were peering over the edge of the wall, firing arrows.

Something was humming below her, vibrating through her boots - a strange, low hum that she only ever felt at Hogwarts or in Diagon Alley: magic calling to magic. Hermione looked down, contemplatively, as she lifted a boot and carefully stepped forward.

Once her entire foot was planted on the wall, the hum increased in vibration and Hermione stifled a gasp as her magic flared through her body like a hot flash. As Hermione lifted her other foot, the hum lowered until it nearly disappeared and her magic surged from her, leaving her cold. Then she stepped forward, repeating with her other foot - and the hum increased and her magic rushed through her again.

_Didn't Arya once mention that the Wall was built using magic? From a Stark ancestor?_ thought Hermione, repeating the careful stepping motion a few times as she walked forward. The reaction was odd and each step was like a swell of her magic, growing and building in her until she was woozy, listing to the side.

There was an empty platform near her, discarded weapons and bows as well as a bleeding body with several arrows peppering the man's chest.

Unable to move further, Hermione sank to her knees and her bare hands dug into the light dusting of snow covering the top of the wall, gathering it into a tiny pile under her palm. She began breathing heavier, bowing her head and squeezing her eyes shut tight.

Hermione curled her hands into fists as she began to struggle to breathe - the magic began to press on her, heavy on her chest despite her bowed form. The magic coursing through her began to resonate in time to her heartbeat, sending blinding pain through her head with each pass.

Cold seeped from the wall into her hands, and then began to spread, slinking up her forearms and
from her boots to her legs. It was like freezing ice water rushing through her veins, moving quickly and spreading from one part of her to the next until it reached her chest, wrapping around her heart and lungs and squeezing.

Hermione gasped, tears coming to her eyes and freezing before they fell, coating her eyelashes with tiny, droplet icicles.

The cold spread further, up the back of her neck and along her hairline, up past her ears and around to her temple, pounding with the furious feel of her magic as it pushed through her body and up - with only one way out.

Hermione threw her head back and screamed.

"She was looking up, your Grace! To the Wall!" Edd's words echoed in Robb's mind as he scrambled across the slick wooden platform. The elevator shaft was still at the top, meaning Hermione had made it but no one had come down yet.

"Come on, come on," he muttered, turning to the crank mechanism at the side and pushing, hoping to turn it around so the shaft returned to the base of the tower. He threw all his weight against it, straining with his body. Robb grit his teeth and closed them tight, hoarsely crying out as the mechanism stuck, frozen.

Then, it gave a little and he nearly tripped.

Robb opened and his eyes and saw Edd on one side of him, a grim look of determination on his face; Mallister and Blackwood were next to him, and on Robb's other side, he saw the same bushy-bearded brother he helped earlier - Grenn.

The other survivors from the northern gate were then there as well, and Grenn was shouting. "Let's do this, men! Together now - push!"

The men all heaved together, and Robb felt his heart lift. He turned back to the crank, grabbing hold of the spoke and pushed against it with Edd. The chains creaked and it moved, sliding backward.

"AGAIN."

They pushed a second time, and the mechanism moved, a bit easier. And then a third, easier again; and a fourth, until the chains clanked and began moving on their own.

Robb whooped loudly and looked up, peering into the snow. "How long does it take?"

"A few minutes," replied Grenn, also looking up from his side. "What's so important up there? The fighting's all but done now."

But Robb just shook his head, anxious as he kept his eyes on the elevator platform that slowly appeared from the snow, slipping down carefully. He didn't wait until it reached the bottom; instead, Robb threw himself forward and crawled onto the platform as soon as he could, hauling himself up. The sheathed sword of Gryffindor clattered loudly against the floor.

"Send me up, Edd!" commanded Robb as he crouched.

Edd frowned. "Your Grace, you shouldn't go alone -"

"It's fine!" snapped Robb, rising to his height. He glared down at the men watching him warily.
"Hermione's up there, Edd, and I'm going after her. So send me up."

With a sigh, Edd turned to Mallister and Blackwood. "You heard his Grace."

The three disgruntled guards, along with a confused Grenn, went back to the mechanism and began pushing it in the opposite direction. With its frequent use, the chains moved smoothly and soon Robb was being lifted, the elevator rising at a slow but steady pace.

When he was nearly at the top - and he could only see a few specks of fire from the courtyards of Castle Black below - the wall shuddered, and the shaft trembled, sending Robb to his knees.

**Oh, that can't be good,** he thought, looking up as terror stole through him. **Hermione!**

Once the elevator came to a stop, Robb scrambled out, looking forward and back as the men around him shouted and grabbed onto whatever posts they could to keep their balance. One man wasn't so lucky and went screaming over the edge.

A blazing light blinded Robb for a moment, accompanied by a fierce cold wind that slammed into him like the force of being hit in the chest with a hammer. He fell backward, blinking back against spots as the light faded. But the light itself was only condensed into pulses, no longer spreading and overpowering like looking into a sun. Robb lifted his head, groaning as he rolled onto his side, looking for the source of the light. Instead, the pulses were coming from a prone figure on its knees several yards ahead.

Robb's heart stopped beating.

"HERMIONE!" he shouted.

The wall continued to tremble, gaining more violence as it did so and Robb struggled with his steps. Each was a trial, and often he was knocked to the side, catching himself on a crate, or a barrel, or another Night's Watch brother on one occasion.

"Where do you think you're going?" the man shouted at him, right in his face.

"I'm going to her!" shouted back Robb over the howling wind.

"Who?" the man glanced back and then at Robb, shaking his head. "It's too dangerous! That's a demon!"

"Try to stop me!"

The man shouted something at Robb, but he didn't hear and pushed past, squinting his eyes against the wind. The wall, beneath his feet, was actively shuddering, pieces of ice chipping off from sections and falling to the ground below. Robb eyed the nearest edge warily until he was only a few feet from Hermione.

She was still kneeling but looking ahead at the land north of the wall; only her eyes weren't the honey-coloured Robb knew so well but whited out. Ice spread from her knees, filling any cracks made just as it made new ones - it was a constant cyclical event of break, fill, break, fill, and Hermione was entirely unaware of it.

"Hermione!" shouted Robb, falling to one knee, bowing his head against the wind. He grit his teeth and rose against the force buffeting against him, pushing despite the current pushing him back. "Hermione, please!"
A giant shudder rippled out from Hermione, sending Robb onto his back. He turned and watched the ripple race down the edge of the Wall, pulling himself to the edge to watch. As it moved down, gaining speed as it did so, any Wildlings climbing were knocked off, sent flying to their deaths.

As the wave reached the foot of the old structure, it crashed into the ground with a dull thud. With wide eyes, Robb watched as the wave moved out, flattening the mammoths on the ground and the few Wildlings who were still advancing, rippling across the snow and kicking it up until it hit the treeline. The first few rows of trees were demolished, turned into splitters until the wave eventually smoothed out.

Gulping, Robb turned back to Hermione, only to gasp as she turned to look at him.

Her hair was blowing everywhere in the breeze, up and around her head with a life of its own. Her eyes were fully white - with no pupil - and there was a strange blue-tinted glow to them. The snow around her was glittering, turning into bits of ice that clung to her exposed skin and making her glisten ethereally.

"Hermione…" whispered Robb, fear reaching up and stealing his voice.

"They need to pay," she said, but her voice was strangely layered like she was speaking with not just her own voice, but other's as well.

"Who?" cried Robb, inching away from the wall and closer to her. The wind shifted, from howling and piercing at him, to around, creating a strange dead zone around the two. Despite that, Hermione's hair still blew around her kneeling form.

"The Wildlings. They attacked. They hurt people," she frowned. "They killed people. They will pay. This must end."

"Hermione, no," said Robb, creeping forward, eyes firmly on her face, despite the fear he felt for her. He had never seen her act this way - or use her magic so freely. He glanced down at her hand and saw that her wand wasn't even in her grasp. In fact, he couldn't see it anywhere.

"Why not?" she asked, frozen lines down her cheeks. "Why should they not pay for what they did? The blood they spilled?"

"Do you strike down a child that doesn't know any better?" asked Robb. "They're Wildlings - this is what they do."

"It is wrong. They must pay."

Robb's heart clenched. "Hermione - you don't like hurting people. You don't want to hurt people."

Hermione tilted her head to the side in a strange manner, and Robb's fear increased. Is this still Hermione? Or is something speaking through her?

"I do not?"

Robb shook his head. He was only a few feet from her now, and he slowly knelt to be on eye-level. "No, you don't. Harry and Ron told me so many stories about you - and Ginny and Neville too. And Luna. They spoke to me of a witch who fought for injustice and against terror. A witch who didn't create terror."

There was a bewildered look on her face. "Create terror? Who is scared?"
Robb cast a hand behind him. "All the men of the Night's Watch, Hermione! And it's not just what you're doing now - ice has fallen off the wall. What if it landed and hit someone, hmm? What if it hit Edd?"

"Edd?" Hermione's voice was slightly pained, and something pulled back from the icy blue of her eyes. But just as swiftly, it returned. "You do not get to lecture me, Robb Stark. You were not here to see what I did."

The accusation was like a punch to his gut. Robb swiftly drew in a pained breath. "I know. I know, and I'm sorry, but-

"But what?" there was a sharp look to her face, her cheekbones slashes against the hollows of her cheeks and for a moment, Robb was startled to see how different Hermione looked, and that maybe, just maybe, she wasn't quite as human as he thought.

"You were not here! You left me alone!" the witch continued to cry, but something was bleeding through the layered voices, stripping them away and leaving only raw emotion and a single voice.

"I know, Hermione, I know," said Robb, quietly, shuffling forward. He reached forward, cupping her cheek. "I didn't mean to go, you know I didn't-"

"I don't know who I am anymore," the witch cried, blinking as tears spilled down her cheeks, freezing immediately and leaving crystalized lines. "I don't think I can control it - my magic feels so different, Robb - it's like it wants to be let out and only violence satiates it. But that's not me! It's not!"

"Shhh," the King said, wrapping another arm around her and drawing her close. Hermione's freezing hands reached up and gripped at his back.

She hiccupped against him, sobbing. "It's like there's a part of me I don't recognize anymore. Ever since I came here, I feel like I'm losing myself. Like a part of me is drifting away, a single snowflake caught in a blizzard and I can't find my feet anymore."

Robb clutched at her tighter, blinking back his own tears as he felt her shudder and gasp.

"Oh God - Robb - I've killed - no - murdered -!"

"Hermione, please…"

She shook her head against his, shaking. "No. No. This place is changing me, Robb. And I don't know if I should st-

"No." Robb drew back from their hug, framing her face tightly, large hands bracketing her cheeks and peered intently into her amber eyes, no longer glowing brightly. His forehead pressed against hers, and she sighed, quietly. "No - don't say it. Don't even think it! We're here. We're in this together. You hear me, Hermione? Together."

She stared up at him.

"Together, Hermione," he implored, fighting the urge to shake her. Instead, he leaned even closer so all that they could see was each other. "So whatever you're going through - whatever is happening to your magic - it doesn't matter, okay? Because we're going to figure it out together. You and me."

Hermione collapsed against Robb. He clutched Hermione's shaking form against him tightly, ignoring the damp and cold seeping into his clothes as he heard her sigh quietly into his stiff, partially
frozen hair.

The wind stopped howling, the snow stopped swirling, turning into a light, gentle flutter, and silence descended on the top of the wall. Even the shouts and distant cries from the battle below were quiet; the battle for Castle Black was over.

To the east, the first, tiniest rays of morning sun pierced through the heavy cloud cover, and together, in silence, they surveyed the north of Westeros, all which lay at their feet.

Several members of the Night's Watch were dead, their numbers even further depleted, and Robb had directed, and helped, Jon as he and his guard rounded up the dead and began to construct a large fire pit in the courtyard.

Lord Bolton and Lord Blackwood had come out of the battle with several wounds, but neither were serious. His Uncle had spent most of his time with a discomforted Jaime Lannister, moving through the buildings, looking for Wildlings. They had the easiest time of the battle, while Lyra and Brienne both spotted several heavy gashes - Brienne was even resting near a pale-haired Wildling who kept making eyes at her.

Hermione, however -

Robb watched her warily as she kept her eyes downcast as she moved slowly through the hall, which had been turned into a makeshift infirmary. It was filled, and Robb watched as she spoke in soft voices to members of the Night's Watch and Wildlings alike, offering to heal them with what she could do. She would move on to the next person, leaving the one who came before staring after her in awe or disquiet.

Her pale face and the smudges under her eyes worried him, and he found himself at her side before he realized he moved. "You don't have to do this," he muttered, catching her arm.

She glanced up at him, pain in her eyes. "Yes, I do. I - I hurt people, Robb. With my magic. It's… it's only right I also use it to heal."

Robb frowned but let go, watching as she moved to the side and away from him. He watched her form a bit longer, until his eyes moved to the side of the room. Edd was badly wounded with a deep cut to his leg, so he could not watch the witch Robb loved.

Instead, Robb caught Patrek Mallister's eyes and he jerked his head in Hermione's direction.

The floppy-haired young man, lounging against the far wall in a dark corner, nodded and rolled off, moving to stand near Hermione as she crouched near a young boy who was fearfully looking at her. Robb turned away, clenching his hands at his sides. If I can't ease the guilt for her, then I can at least ensure she does it on her own with someone watching her.

Robb left the infirmary, stepping outside and surveyed the survivors dragging and carrying bodies. His stomach turned - not from disgust, but from something more akin to fear - and he instinctively reached for the hilt of the sword of Gryffindor-

"Robb."

Robb jerked his head up.

Jon stood in front of him for the first time in two years. He was paler than he was back in Winterfell, but his curly black hair was the same, as well as his dark grey eyes. He had grown taller, and leaner,
in the meantime as they matured into men, and carried himself differently from the skulking he used to do.

"Brother," greeted Robb, a smile stretching across his face. They reached forward and embraced each other at the same time, laughing. He drew back. "Look at you!"

"Me?" replied an astonished Jon. "How about you, Your Highness?"

Robb grimaced. "Don't call me that. Just - not you. Not family."

Jon dipped his chin in acknowledgment. The two stood side by side for a long moment, and then Jon muttered, "We held them off. With your help."

"That is a great victory," replied Robb, with a small smile.

Jon sighed. "Not so much. Mance was testing our defenses and he almost made it through. And, he has more giants, he has more mammoths; he has a thousand times as many men. They'll hit us again tonight. Maybe we can hold them off for a day or two, but we'll never beat them."

"My army will be here by tonight or tomorrow," replied Robb evenly. "He'll hold until then."

Jon shook his head. "No - I need - I need to go."

"Go? Go where?" Robb asked incredulously. "We've only just reunited, Jon! You can't go! I'm here as part of an investigation - one that seems very warranted now-!"

"I'm going to find Mance."

Robb stared. "I beg your pardon, but I believe I just heard that you are planning on going to beyond the Wall to find a man who is leading your enemy." He then stopped and shrewdly looked at his brother. "Have you been ordered to go parley?"

"Who's left to give orders?" scoffed Jon. "The Wildling army is only an army because of Mance. He united a hundred warring tribes. Without Mance, they lose their leader, they lose their purpose, they go back to fighting each other, scatter back to their homes."

Robb's eyes narrowed. "'Without Mance,' you say. Are you going to kill him?"

Jon turned and met his brother's blue eyes. "I'll try."

"I'll forbid you. I'm a King - I can forbid it!"

Jon shook his head. "I'm a member of the Night's Watch. We have no Kings, Robb. You can't command me."

"Just watch me try!" Robb snapped. "The Wildlings will never let you within a hundred yards of him! And even if they did, even if you managed to kill him…"

"They'll kill me. But if I don't go, they'll kill me anyway." Jon looked at Robb askance. "They'll kill the rest of us, too. Including that woman, you came with-"

"Don't," warned Robb, his voice a low growl. "You know, I'm supposed to be the hotheaded one, Jon, not you. It's a bad plan."

"Do you have a better one?"
Robb pursed his lips, and a wry smile came to Jon's.

"I didn't think so," he said. He shook his head. "It's okay. I think I'm on borrowed time anyway-"

He was interrupted by loud shouts. Both he and Robb shared a confused look, and then strode forward, out from underneath the overhang and toward the noise. The round-faced brother Robb had shared a barrel hiding behind was rushing to them, a letter tight in his fist as he waved it.

"Sam?" asked Jon, as the man approached. "What is it?"

"A - raven," he wheezed, "Just - arrived."

"What's it say?" asked Jon, reaching for it, but Sam bent at the waist, his hands (including the one with the letter) at his knees, as he caught his breath.

Jon waited impatiently, eyeing his friend but Robb stifled a laugh, which made Jon send him a glare.

Finally, Sam wheezed once more, and breathed out, "From Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. They're sending help, further reinforcements against the Wildling army Mance Rayder has."

"Where did they get the men?" asked Jon, rearing back in shock.

"That's the thing," he gasped, still struggling to find his breath. "The help? That's coming? Pyke's written that it's Stannis Baratheon - and-" Sam stopped and shot Robb an apologetic look. "-he's claiming he's King of the Seven Kingdoms."

Robb and Jon shared a mutually confused look before turning back to Sam.

"Well," said Robb quietly, blinking in shock. "This ought to be interesting."

TBC...
Stannis' army arrived by the early hours of the next morning, but significantly after the rest of Robb's Northern and Riverlands host had commandeered the base of Castle Black and a portion of Mole's Town that they began rebuilding.

Hermione stood next to Robb from the flanking gate tower catwalk, overlooking the large northern host as they began to wake. On Robb's other side stood Jon, with several other members of the Night's Watch who survived the Wildling battle nearby: Sam, Grenn, and even a sour Alliser Thorne. Lord Bolton stood next to Hermione, his pale eyes surveying the marching Baratheon army with a grim twist to his mouth. Lyra Mormont leaned against the gate tower wall, peering intently with her dark eyes at the host and idly tapping one of the flats of her blades against clothed arm in boredom.

There was an almost visible ripple through the Baratheon host as they realized that they - who were supposed to reinforce a relieved Night's Watch - were not the first relief host to arrive, with a tiny pause in their march.

They're confused, thought Hermione, satisfaction pooling low in her belly. Good. That'll make it easier to deal with them if they're off-kilter.

"Should we send out a welcoming party?" asked Hermione quietly, turning a bit to look at Robb and Jon.

Thorne, who overheard her, scowled. "They can march themselves in without being led like a fucking child-"

"Lord Bolton," interrupted Robb, speaking over Thorne, "Send a message to my uncle and Lord Umber. I think they would be excellent choices in greeting Lord Baratheon."

"Not 'King'?' continued Thorne snidely.

Lyra gave a derisive snort in response, and no one else spoke to the man.

Bolton did not nod in agreement, but quickly darted his eyes at Hermione and then at Thorne; Hermione, understanding what he meant, jerked her head to the side. Robb watched their interaction carefully but made no move to interrupt the two, even as Thorne and a few other members of the Night's Watch started grumbling.

"What's that about?" whispered Jon to his brother as soon as Bolton strode away.

Robb leaned against the barrier, with both his elbows resting on the wooden rail. He kept his eyes forward on the marching host as he spoke. "Hermione's a witch, right?"

"Yes…"

"Well, one of the things her magic is able to do is provide us with faster communication," explained Robb in a very low voice, ensuring that Jon had to strain to hear him. "We've been using enchanted
mirrors for instant communication between high-ranking members of my council."

Jon's face was a picture of shock. "Instant communication?"

Robb nodded, once. "So Lord Bolton was asking Hermione if she wanted her abilities to be well-known at the moment. No one outside of the Northern and Riverlands Lords really know about Hermione's abilities - and even so, I doubt she's shown us all she can do. By the look of things, she wants to keep her abilities as quiet as possible right now."

Something calculated shifted behind Jon's grey eyes. "You don't mind your men taking orders from her?"

Robb rose from the rail and shrugged. "She's proven fairly capable of leading my men when I wasn't around for the past several moons - and besides, why shouldn't they when I've demonstrated I trust her?"

"I would say more than trust..." muttered Jon, but Robb refused to reply further. When he didn't speak, Jon turned to Thorne. "Should we get the dining hall ready for Lord Baratheon and his men?"

Thorne's mouth turned into a ferocious scowl, and he barked, "What am I, your fucking Septa? Get to it, Lord Snow - you don't need my permission."

"That's Commander Snow," inputted Sam quietly, "As Commander Mormont passed the title to him when he died-"

"That wasn't a vote that I agreed to," responded Thorne, spitting on the ground and then turning, walking away at a brisk pace.

Jon sighed. "Thank you, Sam."

"Don't worry 'bout him, Jon," spoke up Grenn. "He's just upset he was passed over as Commander."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," muttered Jon. "And we really don't need anyone else being upset - we need to stand together."

"Well, let's see what Lord Baratheon wants," said Robb, hoping to infuse as much positivity into his voice as possible.

The skeptical side-eye that he received from his half-brother told him he wasn't very successful, but still, Jon kept quiet. Soon he led Robb and Lyra to the dining hall - one of the larger spaces inside Castle Black that was also one of the warmest, with a large hearth at the end of the long, rectangular room located in the larger of the towers.

Already, the hall was filled with a good majority of Robb's inner council: Lord Bracken, Lord Karstark, Lord Bolton, and Hermione stood off to one side, conversing in low tones. Peppered around the Lords were Robb's guard: Edd sat near his father but kept a wary set of eyes on Hermione (no doubt in case she decided to Apparate away, again), along with Lucas Blackwood, Patrek Mallister, and the Smalljon Umber. Wendyl Manderly and Daryn Hornwood fell into step behind Robb as he entered the room, having been waiting at the door for him - Lyra was more than enough to guard him when Hermione was around and within Castle Black.

Brienne and Jaime Lannister were near the cluster of Robb's men, both seated with their backs to the wall so they could watch those entering the room. The Lannister was even drinking ale of some sort from a mug, an incredibly smug expression on his face while Brienne scowled deeply at him, her lips moving but her voice too low for anyone to make out what she was saying.
Opposite them stood Maester Aemon, the wizened, hunched over keeper of lore at Castle Black. He was leaning heavily against a Black Brother, who carefully helped him into a seat by a long table. His unseeing eyes unnervingly managed to locate and focus on Jaime Lannister, whose smug smirk quickly dropped off his face with a long gulp of his drink as soon as he realized the man was looking at him. Sam Tarly settled next to the Maester, as his apprentice, with Jon's friends - Grenn, Edd Tollett - nearby. Alliser Thorne, limping and sporting a purple bruise to the corner of his face went to another group of Brothers and sat heavily on the accompanying long bench.

"Your Grace," greeted Bolton softly. "As requested, the Blackfish and Lord Umber have gone to parley with Lord Baratheon and will bring him here."

"Thank you, Bolton," replied Robb, moving to stand next to Hermione, just as the others shifted to make space for their King by providing a gap by her. He placed a hand low on her back and tilted his face down to speak to her. "Have you heard anything about Baratheon and his movements since I was gone? We didn't get an opportunity to speak of him earlier."

Hermione's mouth turned down in a frown. "Nothing… clear. Some odd information about people being burned in the Stormlands… but that's about it. He was very quiet after Blackwater Bay. Disappeared nearly off everyone's radar. To be fair, none of us were really focused on him when you - when you were gone."

_Radar?_ wondered Robb, but he shook his head. "Let's be careful with what we say around him, then."

Hermione nodded her agreement.

They stood in silence, waiting for Stannis Baratheon to arrive - and when he did so; Hermione took the opportunity to size him up: the man was tall but lean. He moved confidently, but his stepping into the room wasn't brash or bold - but rather that of a man supremely confident in himself and his demeanour reflected that. His armour was unadorned, simplistic and well kept but with dings and dents here and there, indicating he had seen battle.

Both the Blackfish and the elder Umber quickly peeled off from him to stand with Robb's group. The matching sour look on their faces did not bode well for this conversation, and Hermione quickly turned her attention to the slightly shorter man at Baratheon's side. He had grey hair and a pinched brow, his hair shorn close to his scalp. He had a thick, but a neatly trimmed beard that darkened in colour around his nose and tops of his cheeks. He was dressed warmly, in nearly all black, and looked more like one of the Night's Watch than the others.

Opposite him stood a tall, willowy woman with dark, blood red hair in loose waves. She had odd red eyes, a hue that seemed to be lit with an inner fire. Her dress was rather provocative with a dip by her cleavage and she appeared underdressed for the weather. But -

Hermione squinted at her and her magic - still buzzing under her skin from whatever happened when she was at the top of the wall - tingled and she stiffened. Unlike the strange man at Harrenhal when she helped take back the old fortress, who felt like death and decay, _this_ woman felt like fiendfyre and the cruciatus licking and biting into Hermione's skin.

At the same time, the woman's eyes moved over to her and stopped. The two stared at each other for a long, long moment, just as Stannis Baratheon surveyed those in the room. When he spoke, Hermione tore her eyes from the woman in red to focus on him.

"You're the Commander?"
Jon nodded slowly. "I am."

"Do you know who I am?"

Jon nodded, again. "You're Lord Stannis Baratheon-"

"This is Stannis Baratheon, the one true king of the Seven Kingdoms," interrupted the man at his side, causing everyone to look at him. "You should address your King with more care, Lord Commander."

The tenseness in the room skyrocketed, and some of the Northerners grumbled.

"The Night's Watch does not meddle in the affairs of the realm," replied Jon, slowly, eyes slightly narrowed when he spoke. His voice had significantly cooled.

"Oh?" said Stannis, turning his eyes to where Robb stood with Hermione, surrounded by his men. "And yet I see a pretender king - or have so many Northern houses pledged to the Night's Watch recently?"

"Who're you calling a pretender king?" rumbled Umber, his voice low and deep as he took a threatening step forward.

"As my brother's heir, I am next in line for the throne," interjected Stannis smoothly, his face unchanging as he spoke. "Therefore, I am king of the seven kingdoms. That includes the North."

There was a deep scowl on Lyra's face when she spoke. "We know no king, but the King in the North - whose name is Stark."

"I beg your pardon." Stannis' voice was sharp, but quiet - like a deadly blade sliding between ribs. The dining room they were in - already cold from the onslaught of winter - dropped in temperature further.

"King Stannis is more than just the protector of the seven realms," came the soft, sibilant tones of the woman in red, as she stepped out from just behind Stannis to make everyone focus on her. She was overtly sexual with the swing of her hips, the low, full tone of her voice and Hermione immediately distrusted her. "He is Azor Ahai - the Prince Who was Promised. He will bring peace, he will bring protection; he will end all wars. All wars."

Hermione couldn't help it; she snorted and the sound echoed in the room. Robb's hand, low on her back, spasmed a bit as all eyes swung her way.

"You do not believe the prophecy," the woman said, her red eyes focused unerringly on Hermione.

The witch shook her head. "Oh, I believe that you believe in the prophecy - but that's how prophecy works. It's highly subjective and often, they come true because people heard it and believe it. It's self-fulfilling." She tossed her head back, her hair bouncing and tilted her chin up as she peered imperiously down at the woman. "Besides - you haven't even said the prophecy - just that you think Lord Baratheon-"

"King Stannis," muttered the whiskered man.

"-is this person," finished Hermione, ignoring the interruption.

"You speak like you know of prophecy."
Hermione's mouth flattened into a tight line, and an echo rang through her mind, Harry's sixteen-year-old self and voice cracking as he told her and Ron: 

... neither can live while the other survives, for either must die at the hand of the other...

"I do," she said instead.

Robb's hand slid from her low back, higher up and then pressed between her shoulder blades. Hermione gave an inaudible sigh and leaned back, letting his hand ground her.

The red woman's eyes glittered in the flickering candlelight. "And so do I," she said quietly. There was a moment of breathlessness between the two, and then she turned from Hermione, back to Stannis. "Let us rest the topic for now."

Stannis's eyes were shrewd as he glanced between the two women, but he nodded and turned back to Jon. "I believe you have some prisoners from the attack."

"About two dozen," replied Jon, glancing at Sam who deftly stepped forward with a parchment, filled with his smooth cursive and numbers. "And another fifteen that are injured."

"How many dead?"

Jon frowned. "Wildlings? Nearly a hundred. Out of our Brothers?" Sadness passed over his face, as he remembered fallen friends - Hermione knew one of those, Pyp, had been shot by the redheaded woman she had been so obsessed with finding, the magic of the Wall and the area urging her to go after the Wildling with such abandon. "Almost all. We're down to no more than twenty active men without major injuries."

"And where is this - King-Beyond-the-Wall - as he calls himself?" asked the whiskered man.

Grenn, nearby, shrugged. "Well, it's in his name, isn't it? Beyond the Wall."

The whiskered man ground his molars. "How many men does he have?"

"Still?" Jon shrugged. "Perhaps thousands. A hundred thousand. It's hard to tell from the top of the Wall, but they aren't camped that far away. I'm sure they'll try again shortly."

"So many? How is that possible?" the man continued, his voice growing with ire and incredulity. "How could there be that many? I thought they were just random tribes and small villages-"

"Mance Rayder has been gatherin' them for some time now," interjected Grenn, who folded his arms and jutted his square jaw out in stubbornness. "We've been tellin' you lot that-"

"If there is that many," broke in Stannis, his collected voice carrying above the growing din and argument between Grenn and his man, "Then I'll have the thousands of his men in chains by nightfall, but have nowhere to put them, have nothing to feed them."

"So kill 'em," grumbled Thorne from his seat. "That's what Wildlings' are good for: being dead."

Jon scowled deeply and sent the older man a dark look.

"If you plan to attack Mance's men - if you had seen the things that I've seen, you would burn any of your dead before nightfall." Jon's gaze shifted from Thorne, who met his glare, to everyone else in the room. "All of them."

There was an uneasy silence; Hermione herself frowned and thought back to the reactions that the
Lords had when they saw her Dark Arts textbook, of the Inferi and what they called them - and the history behind such creatures. Were these White Walkers and wights the reason why Maege's brother Jeor was dead? They still didn't know what happened at the Great Ranging - the Night's Watch brothers had been cagey and quiet about it and the downtime since their arrival was spent either tending to injuries or burning the dead - on Jon's insistence.

She turned partially to Robb and tugged on his sleeve. He glanced at her as she leaned up on her toes and whispered in his ear, "We need to know more about the Great Ranging that happened. Something isn't being said."

Robb drew back far enough to peer at Hermione, his eyes scanning her face and taking in her serious countenance. He nodded, once.

"-If there is no space to house these prisoners, or feed them, then I suggest we treat them all the same, including those prisoners here at Castle Black," the woman in red was speaking. "Let us offer them to R'hllor-"

"The who now?" muttered Patrek Mallister from behind Robb.

Her red eyes turned to him as if she had heard him clear across the room. "The Lord of Light is wondrous and kind, Brother. He is One, locked in battle with the Great Other. From the Other's domain of ice and terror, will a great battle commence with only Azor Ahai, the Prince Who Was Promised, able to defeat such an evil."

_The Great Other?_ Thought Hermione, sharing a quick glance with Lord Karstark as he shifted to move up to her left. The paleness of his face and his own worried eyes echoed her feelings on the matter: there was some connection between the religion of the red woman and what lurked beyond the Wall.

"You think Lord Baratheon is this… Azor Ahai?" asked Robb, the foreign title sounding strange on his tongue as he rolled it around the two words.

"I do not think," replied the woman, "I know."

"And what does it mean, to offer people to R'hllor?" asked Hermione carefully, pitching her voice into a cautious tone.

"They will burn," came the woman's swift reply, a strange, fanatical light to her eyes as she spread her arms and her sleeves billowed behind her. "Although not pure and innocent, R'hllor will take their sacrifice. For the night is dark and full of terrors, and the Lord of the Light will lead us from the darkness."

A few of the Baratheon guards Stannis brought with him, hovering awkwardly near the door at the back of the hall, murmured in reverence, "the night is dark and full of terrors," causing the nearest Night's Watch brothers to scuttle back in alarm, disgust on their faces.

"You want to _burn_ them?" blurted out a shocked Jaime Lannister, slowly rising from his place at the table. Brienne copied him, her eyes wary and her hand already resting on the hilt of her sword.

Stannis shifted, his entire body turning to face Jaime, disgust taking over his stone-cold face as his eyes swept the man from head to toe. He turned back to Robb and demanded, "I will have the Kingslayer. He will pay for his crimes and justice will be served-"

"Jaime Lannister will not be going anywhere," broke in Hermione, hotly as she took a few steps forward. Her eyes flashed and she felt her hands tremble at her side as her magic roared up, a loud
pounding in her ears. "He is paying penance for his crimes against House Stark and as such, he will not be extradited to the Stormlands for execution!"

Stannis's upper lip curled slightly. He kept his eyes on Hermione but addressed Robb: "You allow this woman to speak for you?"

Nonchalantly, Robb shifted into a relaxed pose, although he kept a hand casually resting on the hilt of the sword of Gryffindor. "Why shouldn't I? She's doing such fine work."

There were chortles around the Northerner and Riverlanders, signalling their solidarity around their King and Hermione; even if one agreed with Stannis, they weren't about to single themselves out by publicly disagreeing with their King.

Feeling a bit more secure, Jaime cleared his throat. "I don't like repeating myself, Lord Baratheon. You would burn these people?"

"Their sacrifice would appease R'hllor," the woman explained, although Hermione was sure her disbelief was being made obvious with her skeptical eyebrow-raise. "They will ascend to the Hall of Light, to sit beside the Lord of all things good."

"Poppycock," scoffed Karstark under his breath, causing Hermione's lips to twitch into a small smile. She then turned, sharing a quick look with Robb that conveyed her thoughts on the matter. There was something special in the way he seemed to read her, able to understand exactly what she was trying to say without words because he gave her a small smile in return and decisive nod. His steps were solid as he stepped up to match pace alongside Hermione, allowing them to present a united front for the room. "There will be no burnings here."

"Agreed," added Jon quickly, who had been quietly watching. "I will not give over our prisoners to R'hllor or anyone else for death. There has been too much of that lately - with winter coming - and everything else along with it - we must stand together as one."

The woman's red eyes darkened, glittering as they coolly turned from the King in the North, the woman standing beside him, and then to the Black brothers of the Night's Watch, a few who were slowly standing to convey their support to their Commander.

"Very well," she finally said. "I see that none of you are believers of R'hllor just yet. But you will be, soon." Her ruby-coloured eyes landed on Jon, and her blood-red lips turned down in a frown. "And you will learn this most of all, Commander. You, who knows that the night is dark and full of terrors. You, who knows what keeps the savage dark at bay. You have seen the Great Other and his ilk - you know. And this will doom you."

The woman swept the sleeves of her dress in an arc, and strode out of the room, leaving Stannis Baratheon and his man and guard. After a few long moments of terse silence, where everyone looked at the other, Stannis sighed. "I will take several companies of my men to meet Mance Rayder and accept his surrender. He cannot win against my men, and even with our combined forces, it would be a slaughter."

"He would see reason," agreed Jon solemnly. "I was the man's prisoner, once. He could have tortured me, or have me killed, but he didn't."

Stannis nodded. "Will the gate be opened for us?"

Jon paused, debating a moment, but then nodded, shortly. "There is a giant that needs to be removed from the Black Gate tunnel, but once your men have helped clear it, you may pass through
There was nothing left to say after that; Stannis - either realizing the wisdom that insisting he was King of the Seven Realms while two of those were in open, and antagonist, rebellion, was not a good idea; or that, he had a greater purpose - decided that their conversation was done. He turned and left the room, without speaking.

The whiskered man sighed, his shoulders slumping but he then straightened and followed with a careful nod at both Jon and then Robb. Once the Baratheon guards were gone, with the Smalljon Umber and Patrek Mallister swiftly following to ensure they left, did the room seem to sigh in relief as one.

"She's a witch, isn't she?" finally asked Robb carefully, glancing at Hermione.

Hermione frowned. "Of a sort, I think. Her - my magic - well, they definitely recognized each other. But it was like - like oil and water. Two different kinds."

"But if she comes from a place of magic, like you-"

"She's from Asshai, who knows what that place is like," interrupted Hermione, eyes hard as Robb frowned. "Right? She's a red priestess. They come only from Asshai. That's not like my home, Robb. Not at all."

"There's a prophecy though..." the redhead continued slowly, glancing at Jon who tilted his head in response. "What she said about you-"

"Rubbish!" protested Hermione. "You can't trust divination, at all! It's- it's- woolly."

Jon was nodding along, even as behind him, Robb could hear Jaime Lannister ask, "what does that even mean, 'woolly'? How can something be made of sheep's fur?"

"I don't think we have anything to worry about, Robb," placated Jon, with a tight smile on his face, one that matched the tight lines that stretched at the corner of his eyes.

Robb's faced pinched in worry and he felt his mouth turn down as his eyes skipped over his half-brother's face. Gods, we're only twenty - one and twenty at most - and Jon already has wrinkles. Has being Commander been so difficult on him?

Jon strode away, leaving Robb behind with his guard, as well as his advisers. His great-uncle spoke up. "Is that fecking idiot really going to go beyond the wall to fight Mance Rayder? Doesn't he know what he's going to face?"

Robb sighed and resisted the urge to run his hand over his jaw. "Southerners barely acknowledge the North exists, Uncle; it's unlikely they'd believe any of our tales." He turned his steely blue eyes on some of the remaining Night's Watch brothers as they milled around the Great Hall, slowly filtering out one-by-one until his eyes rested on Sam Tarly and Maester Aemon. "But I do believe it's time we start getting our facts straight."

"Hear, hear," muttered Karstark, and as one, the Northern and Riverlands contingent turned to face the two men still sitting at the table.

Sam immediately tensed, eyes growing wide.

"Samwell?" Maester Aemon queried, his milky, unseeing eyes turning in his steward's direction, sensing the tension in the younger man's frame.
Robb strode over to the far table and loomed over it for a long moment, looking down at Sam whose his eyes grew wider and wider until he resembled an owl. The younger man had paled, the white of his face contrasting sharply with the black of his clothing, and a faint sheen of sweat glistened in the dim candlelight.

Then, abruptly, Robb sat down. "Samwell Tarly, correct?"

Maester Aemon's unseeing eyes slid over to the new voice, just as Sam squeaked, "Y-Yes, Y-Your Grace."

"Your Grace?" echoed Aemon, a quizzical furrow to his brow that quickly smoothed. "Ah - Robb Stark, is it? The King in the North?"

"That it is, Maester Aemon," the young man replied, a small smile on his lips. Hermione wandered over and watched Robb as he projected cheerfulness in his voice, things that never reached the coolness of his eyes. She knew this game - he was emulating portions of Harry, who learned it from a mix of Remus, Sirius, and even the eldest Weasleys and Kingsley, after the war.

"Useful," she had thought at the time, the one time she watched Harry deal with a Wizengamot member in the months following the funerals, just shortly before she ended up in Westeros. Robb had spent much time with Harry in Britain, it seemed.

"What can we do for you, Your Grace?" the older man continued, his voice thin and reedy with age, but still polite. It was an interesting juxtaposition to see how the Night's Watch treated Robb versus how they treated Stannis.

"Maester Aemon," began Robb, still in that genial tone, "Perhaps you and Sam here can answer some questions for us…"

"We shall do our best," promised the old man, nodding firmly while Sam's eyes continued to dart nervously between the two. There was something on his face that implied he had an inkling of what was coming.

Robb's answering grin was a feral thing; his teeth were sharp and pointed, and his eyes blazed in the flickering torchlight so much so that he looked eerily like Grey Wind on the prowl. Something in Hermione recognized the otherworldliness in Robb's expression, and her eyes narrowed on him as he leaned forward, over the table.

Sam leaned back in response and even Aemon seemed to be struggling to hold back from physically responding to something he couldn't see.

"Tell me," began Robb, his voice low and sounding like a dangerous purr, "Tell me exactly what happened during the Ranging."

Aemon's mouth turned down in a heavy frown, and then he turned partially to Sam. Sweat pooled around the larger man's collar as he audibly gulped, nervously wringing his hands. "W-Well - it - it started a b-bit like this, Y-Your Majesty…"

And as he spoke, Hermione's eyes grew wide with terror - as did Robb's, and those who remained in the Great Hall with them - until they were enormous circles.

Fury pounded through Robb's body as he stalked down the winding halls and crisscrossing outdoor pathways that connected the various buildings at Castle Black; Grey Wind keeping pace at his heels as he took one hallway or stair after the other, in search of his half-brother.
"Robb! Robb - wait!"

"YOUR HIGHNESS, PLEASE."

He ignored Hermione's pleas and the calls from his guards and Great-Uncle. His blood rushed in his ears, leaving him deaf to almost anything as his thoughts swam, some faster than others as his hands clenched at his sides.

*Commander Mormont was killed in a coup by his own men,* thought Robb, flashing back to the pain in Maege's face when she finally learned the truth of her brother's death. The duplicity and disloyalty from the oath-bound Brothers made his Stark blood burn, especially given where and when the murder had taken place.

*Their horn blew three times,* he thought, and despite the flush his anger gave him, his skin broke out in goose pimples. *Once to greet a brother; twice for Wildlings. Three times for a wight. The undead walk Westeros, once more.*

It was a hard truth to swallow. It was one thing hearing Karstark and the others talk about these *- Inferi-* as Hermione called them, and seeing the images of a lumbering, slow-moving, emaciated corpses with stringy clumps of hair and hollow cheeks in her books to - to knowing -

Sam Tarly slew an Other. A White Walker attempted to kill him, after killing others, and Sam stabbed it with an obsidian dagger. Hermione's frown and glazed eyes meant she was processing the information, and a part of Robb wished he could do the same, to figure out the connection between the Others and obsidian - but another part, the prevalent part - was recoiling in horror, at knowing that Old Nan's stories weren't stories, but cautionary tales of *truth.*

Fighting a shiver, he absently wondered, *what else did she tell us that is true?*

Then his thoughts returned to the issue at hand, and his anger roared to the front of his mind just as he took the last stairs two at a time until he stood before a closed wooden door. He vaguely heard his half brother's muffled voice through it.

For a moment, he paused. *Do I do this? But then -*

*Jeor Mormont's death.*

*The Others and wights.*

*The Wildling army.*

*Burning the dead.*

*A prophecy -*

*The magic of the Wall and its effect on Hermione -*

*Mance Rayder -*

*Stannis Baratheon, the Priestess from Asshai -*

*Azor Ahai -*

And Robb's face morphed into a stern countenance, echoing that of his father's. Despite his red hair and blue eyes, he never looked more like Eddard Stark at that moment when he reached forward and shoved the door open, effectively causing everyone in the room beyond to stop speaking and stare at
"Why didn't you *tell* me, Jon?"

The demand burst from Robb's mouth - half-pleading - as he stared at his sibling who blinked back in shock.

He stood with a few members of the Night's Watch, his friends who did not remain in the Great Hall earlier, and some of the senior members who survived the battle. There were invisible battle lines drawn with who stood where in the room, but the Black brothers turned as one and were a collective force when they regarded the young King.

"Tell you what?" asked Jon, but there was a hint of wariness in his tone as the latest Commanded squared his shoulders against whatever accusation Robb was about to toss at him.

"About Commander Mormont," bit out Robb, stepping into the room, Grey Wind slinking in behind him and skirting to the edges, eyeing the Black brothers who just as warily eyed the large direwolf back. "About the Ranging and what happened-"

"What happened?" scoffed Thorne, who was seated near the hearth, half his face shadowed. The downward turn of his mouth pulled at the purple bruise that stretched from his temple to his jaw. "What happened was that we were fucking unprepared, that's what happened! It was fucking chaos, your majesty-"

"Thorne, that's enough," ordered Jon in a frosty voice Robb had never heard.

The Targaryen loyalist sent his scowl at the Commander and his gravelly voice cut through the silence of the room. "Enough? Don't think your precious King in the North has a right to know what you think is coming, Lord Snow?"

"Think is coming?" echoed a Black brother near Jon. "Think? Thorne - you saw it just like the rest of us who managed to get back-"

"I didn't see anything!" the man in question roared, standing from his seat.

"And what about those who didn't return?" asked Grenn, his voice and eyes pointedly fixed on the older man.

Thorne seemed to want to spit but refrained. However, it left a look of distaste on his face instead. "Deserters. Or dead, no thanks to those Wildling cunts."

Behind Robb, framed in the door, Hermione appeared with Eddard panting heavily beside her. The Blackfish was close behind, his cheeks flushed.

Jon glanced at them and then turned back to Robb. "We need to prepare for what's coming-"

"But you haven't *said* what's coming, Snow! Just these half-truths and riddles!" protested Robb, his hands clenched into fists at his side. "Speak plainly, damn it!"

Jon's lips thinned and his nostrils flared in annoyance at the tone Robb took. "That is a conversation meant for the rest of your council to hear as well, Your Majesty."

Robb's eyes narrowed and the two half-siblings stared at each other for a few tense moments. Hermione took the opportunity to move into the room, cautiously, her eyes on Robb until she was at his side. She touched his arm lightly, a graze of her fingertips. Robb's entire body trembled.
"Commander Snow has the right idea," she murmured at Robb. "Get some rest, think about what we've learned, and let's discuss it tomorrow."

Without removing his eyes from Jon, Robb slowly nodded.

"Just remember, brother," stated Robb, his voice low, "That you asked for help. It has come. Now is not the time to hold information close to the chest."

Then, he spun, giving his back to the Night's Watch in the room. He reached for Hermione's hand and took it gently, although his every action was sharp and punctuated with quick bursts of energy. Behind them, Grey Wind growled once, and then followed, with Edd and the Blackfish eyeing not only their king but those who remained behind in the room until they, too, walked away.

Hermione waited a few moments (and several hallways and stairs later) before speaking.

"You know," she began, causing Robb to glance at her in curiosity, "Of all my bad traits to pick up, I never expected you to take my impatience and need to burst into closed meeting to argue your points."

Robb stopped walking and looked at Hermione blankly. "What?"

Hermione stopped as well and looked up at him, a tiny twist to her lips on her face. "Shouting your opinion? Being emotional? Doesn't that sound familiar?"

Behind, Edd tried to hide a snicker.

"I distinctly remember when I shouted at you in a meeting," helped Hermione, a knowing look on her face. "Something about not sharing information? A certain battle near Riverrun?"

Understanding dawned on Robb's face.

"And then you cried and ran out of the room," finished Robb, a fond look on his face.

Hermione raised her eyebrows in response to that. "And then I ran out of the room. Uh-huh."

"Gods, I was so angry with you - questioning me in front of my men," Robb sighed and shook his head. "Those were the early days when you still weren't sure about Westerosi custom…"

"Uh-huh," agreed Hermione, although her voice was much more pointed this time.

It took Robb a moment to understand what she meant and then he heavily sighed, a sheepish blush on his cheeks, nearly matching the auburn of his hair. "I-"

"I think it might be best if you sleep on this and start fresh tomorrow," interjected Hermione.

Robb glanced around, noting Edd's carefully blank face and then his great uncle's - which matched Hermione's. Sensing he was outnumbered - as Edd was unlikely to say anything in defense of his king when there was a witch who could render him mute - Robb nodded and ran a hand through his curly hair.

"Tomorrow," he agreed, as the group began walking again, this time in the direction of the rooms they were assigned in a nicer guest tower.

"But I want everyone there, Uncle," he said, turning to face the Blackfish, who nodded. "A full council of whoever is here and can be spared. I want to know what's going on with the Others and all knowledge the Night's Watch has on them." Concern spread across his face. "I have a feeling
we're going to need every bit of knowledge necessary."

The next day, the discussion with the Night's Watch did not go smoothly. It began well enough, although Jon and the other Black Brothers seemed wary of Robb and his cool facade when the King in the North and his council arrived for discussions, with Maester Aemon regurgitating most of what he had said to Robb the day before, things seemed straightforward.

Until -

"With every person the wights and Others kill, it's another body to their army," said Jon passionately, his eyes sweeping the room. "We cannot allow them to increase their army. We need to help the Free Folk."

There was a moment of silence, and then the room erupted; the Black Brothers and Northmen alike were aghast and shouting at Jon.

Jon listened to the cacophony of noise before he finally banged his closed fists hand on the table, causing everyone to fall silent.

"We have no choice! We must open the gates for the Free Folk to enter the North!" he cried. "If we do not, they will only become part of the Others' army. And that will be one more wight to deal with when the time comes."

A few men around the room scoffed, but Robb felt himself frown. He glanced around at his council and the Lords of the North with him in the room. Many, especially those who lived closest to the wall like Karstark and Umber, were scowling something fierce.

"Listen to me! LISTEN TO ME!" Jon was shouting, trying to be heard, "YOU EITHER FIGHT FOR THE LIVING OR ARE AN ENEMY OF THE LIVING-"

From his seat, and from behind laced fingers he held up to his mouth, Robb watched the room, watching as it unfolded into anger. Theoretically, Robb agreed with Jon; they couldn't allow the Others to continue to build their army with the bodies of the Wildings beyond the Wall - but he also knew that their culture was so different from the North's, that even if they settled them in the North, they likely wouldn't be able to adhere to the Northern rules and customs.

There has to be a solution, thought Robb, his mouth pulling down. He found himself glancing at Hermione, who silently sat on his right, her amber eyes keenly watching the debate.

"-The Gift is the only place for them!" continued Jon, his voice loud and heard over the noise of the room. The arguments around him were dying down. "There's enough free land for them to till and build."

"And enough fertile nearby land to rape and pillage!" argued Umber hotly. He jabbed a finger into his chest. "My lands!"

Karstark, nearby, was nodding along in agreement.

Jon protested, "They wouldn't-

"You can't promise that," shouted back Karstark, his whiskery mustache quivering in anger. "Don't make those kinds of promises, Lord Commander."

Before the argument could descend further, Hermione stood up. "Look, it's clear that we're not going
to reach a consensus on the topic today. Why don't we take a thirty-minute break, cool off, and then come back to this topic? I might have some ideas that would work for everyone."

Angrily, Karstark huffed and sat back in his seat, and a few other Northern lords murmured their agreement. However, one voice rose above the rest, cutting through the room like a blade.

"I don't take orders from a jumped up chit or some king's whore," spat Thorne.

Stunned, Hermione fell back into her seat, staring with wide eyes at the man she hadn't even really spoken to before.

Immediately, Robb was on his feet, the sword of Gryffindor unsheathed. At his side, Edd mimicked his King, although his sword arm was nearly shaking with repressed rage.

Around them, the men on Robb's council were shouting insults and outrage at Thorne, who bore their words with a deep scowl.


The room went quiet, with only the sound of Grey Wind's low growl to indicate just how close Robb was to losing control of the situation.

Hermione reached out and gently placed a hand on Robb's arm, the one that held the sword. He didn't glance at her, but his form softened a bit at a touch. It gave Robb time to sweep his blue eyes around the room, catching several Black Brother's who looked away in shame, and then finally Jon, who appeared shocked.

"I think we're done for tonight," said Robb lowly, his voice still a thick rumble. He sheathed the sword of Gryffindor back in its case with a loud snap. "This conversation can continue tomorrow when clearer heads will prevail, and men will not childishly insult women just because they're chauvinistic pricks."

Thorne blinked for a moment, mouthing, "Chauvinistic?" to himself as Robb pushed away from his chair. His council - the few not already on their feet - copied him until everyone was standing. Hermione rose slowly, too.

Robb nodded at Jon, whose face was solemn as he nodded back. "A good idea, King Robb. Let's convene over lunch in the great hall tomorrow. Until then - goodnight." Jon's grey eyes flicked to Hermione. "My lady."

Hermione didn't speak, but demurred with a small smile and wriggled her fingers in goodbye as Robb wrapped a hand around her arm, and lead her from the room.

Once they had gone down the hall and were well out of hearing distance from the room, Robb stopped, spinning on his heel to face his council, who all wore grim looks.

"While I recognize we're not likely to come to any accord," began Karstark, his whiskers twitching, "This evening demonstrated how much of unmitigated disaster the Night's Watch is."

"Their leadership is fractured," agreed Bolton quietly. "They are fractured."

"If everything we've learned is true," added Umber, with a rumble that was quiet given his loud voice, "Then how can we believe that the Wall will maintain its defenses against the Others?"

The chilling thought made every one pause.
"We can't do anything about it now," sighed Robb. "But I do urge you to try to be more open-minded tomorrow during talks. Jon - Commander Snow - is right that we don't want to give the Others more bodies for fuelling their army..."

"But," sighed Maege when Robb trailed off.

The King grimaced. "Yes, but. Wildings in the North? Settling in Brandon's Gift?" he shook his head. "It does not bode well."

The group stood silently for a long, tense moment.

"We can't do anything else tonight," Hermione finally spoke up, her voice quiet. "Let's just get some sleep. Maybe something will come to us in the meantime that we can attempt to convey tomorrow."

Robb nodded. "Let's meet for breakfast, in my solar. Any ideas, any suggestions so that we can appear united tomorrow would be appreciated."

The council murmured their agreement and goodnights, until only Robb and Hermione's guard - in the form of Edd, Patrek, and Lyra - remained. Robb looked around at everyone, his eyes lingering on Hermione as he muttered, "Let's go," with Grey Wind silently padding alongside the King, on his other side.

He kept quiet the entire walk back to their assigned quarters - no one was kidding themselves anymore that Hermione was keeping to the room she was assigned - dismissing Edd, Patrek, and Lyra with a sharp nod. He ushered Hermione into the room before him, and only after Grey Wind went in first as an advanced scout, using his nose in case there was any danger.

Once inside, Robb slammed the door shut, and then allowed his furious mood to bubble to the surface, having repressed it during their walk. He was muttering under his breath insults and something about Thorne and a moment alone with Grey Wind.

Hermione leaving him to stew while she went directly to the chest of drawers she was using as a makeshift desk. She picked up a few loose parchments, reading the latest correspondence that Cerwyn sent regarding plans at Winterfell, including what Sansa and Arya were up to.

*He's definitely right to be cautious regarding those two*, thought Hermione fondly.

She was so focused on her readings, making appropriate "mhmhm," and "uh huh," noises that she completely missed what Robb said until it caught in her brain.

"-can you believe that man? Who does he think he is?" a snort. "What a jumped-up bastard Targaryen loyalist-"

"Uh huh."

"-It was an insult, Hermione! An insult. Not just an insult to me," seethed Robb, sitting on the bed and yanking his boots off viciously, "But an insult to you and the entirety of the North and Riverlands!"

"Mhmhm."

"Alliser Thorne!" there was a sneer in Robb's voice. "Insulting you! The Winter Witch! The woman who will become Queen in the North! You've done more for the Gods' forsaken country than most will ever know-"
"Uh huh-" the paper fell from Hermione's hands and she froze in shock. Her entire being stilled while Robb continued to speak, this time muffled as he reached over his neck to grab at the back of his shirt and pull it up and over.

"How that man was Jeor Mormont's Master of Arms, I have no idea - there's not a single diplomatic bone in his body-"

"What did you say?"

Robb stopped speaking and glanced at Hermione, who stood rigid, her back to him. Frowning, Robb repeated, "That he's not diplomatic at all-"

"No. Earlier."

Robb's frown deepened, thinking back to his emotion-fueled rant. Suddenly, the words he spoke caught up to his brain, and his mouth snapped shut. "Is this about… about the -" he paused and licked his lips nervously. "The future?"

"Future?" echoed Hermione, a tremor in her voice. "Robb - I mean, not that I'm not flattered or something - but, uh - I'm mean, we're twenty - and um-"

Robb reached out and gently touched Hermione's shoulder. She spun, her brown eyes wide as they darted everywhere around the room but at him, and her hair frizzled, sparking just the tiniest amount. He eyed her corkscrews warily and then deliberately caught her chin with his hand, holding it in place gently, with only the smallest amount of pressure so that she could pull out if she wanted.

"You know I want you," he said, summoning his courage. His voice was low, intimate. "I thought that we were both clear on that?"

"Yes, but-"

"Maybe things are different in Britain, Hermione," continued Robb, speaking over her and holding her gaze. "But here? It's more than I just want... you," he said, glancing down at her from head to toes, the look scalding and sending a heated rush through her body.

"I want all of you. Body," he slid his free hand down to wrap around her waist.

"Mind," he leaned forward and touched his forehead to hers, and he felt her eyes flutter shut more than saw as he copied her.

"And soul," he breathed the last, nudging just a bit closer to slide a butterfly kiss across her lips. "And that means forever, for me."

"Robb…"

"Is this about being Queen? Say the word and I'll step down," he continued. "I won't lie - I'll hate it - these men put their trust in me and I want to see it through. My honour would demand nothing less - but if it means losing you? Arya can take over. She can be Queen in the North."

Hermione tilted her chin up a tiny amount, peering up at Robb from under her lashes as he gazed down at her. He let the hand holding her chin drop away, finding her right hand and then clasped them together, lacing the fingers together and bringing them up to his mouth to kiss her knuckles.

"Together, remember?" he reminded her, his voice low. "You and me. No matter what."
"I don't know if I-" Hermione broke off and swallowed heavily. "This is a bit fast-

"Then we'll go as slow as you want," answered Robb earnestly. "I know things are different for you, that courting is different in Britain-"

Hermione bit back a hysterical giggle.

"...and no one needs to know," he continued. "I mean, my men will probably expect something sooner rather than later, even if it's just a betrothal announcement - most know that we share a room and I'm sure they don't want any illegitimate children running around-"

"Oh, my God, Robb!" Hermione's face turned bright red.

"We haven't exactly been careful," he disagreed, a frown on his face as he pulled back a bit. "And these things can happen-"

"Yeah, no," nervously laughed Hermione, "Um, there's a potion-"

Robb blinked. "Oh. You've been. Erm. Taking…?"

Hermione nodded her head rapidly, her face still flushed very pink.

Robb was silent for a long moment. "Well." He freed a hand and raised it to scratch at the side of his cheek, where his fuzz was growing into a very ginger beard. Hermione thought it made him look older than he was.

His blue eyes flicked back at Hermione. "How long will it last?"

"Oh, months," replied Hermione quickly. "At least."

"Good," replied Robb, a slow smile stretching across his face. It looked rather filthy when it reached his eyes, turning the blue into a deep colour that reminded Hermione of a storm at sea. He reached for Hermione again, drawing her flush to his body. "So we have… time… then?"

Hermione nodded slowly, mesmerized, her mouth slightly parted.

"I won't lie, Hermione," continued Robb, his voice low, "You know what I want in our relationship. You know where I stand. I will court you if you allow it. Properly - in Northern fashion. Will you let me?"

Hermione blinked and frowned. "Would that mean I'm making a decision, agreeing to the courting?"

"No." Robb shook his head. "Just that my intent is there. And maybe it will get Karstark off my back about betrothing you to Edd. Or even Harrion."

Hermione's mouth twitched. Robb saw and glared.

"Stop it."

"It's kind of funny."

"It is not." Robb knew he sounded petulant.

Hermione laughed. "It really is. Me being desirable to any degree is funny, given how my Hogwarts years went."
"You said you - what's the word? Dated?" asked Robb.

"Yeah, kind of," agreed Hermione, "One date with a boy from a completely different school from a completely different country; a pseudo-date with a jerk that I used to make Ron jealous, and then one very awkward kiss with Ron, in a wet, moldy secret lair with a giant, rotting basilisk corpse." There was a twinkle in her eye as she deadpanned, "I'm very experienced, you see."

Robb stifled a snort and gathered Hermione close into a hug, rocking them slightly back and forth. "You're perfect the way you are."

Hermione sighed into his shoulder, clutching at his back. "I can't make any promises, Robb. Not right now."

"That's okay," he muttered into her hair. "Just promise me you'll think about it."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

Hermione drew back. "Then court me, Your Highness."

Robb grinned, drawing Hermione toward the bed and allowing both of them to fall into it. Hermione resting comfortably on him. "Excellent. Of course, there is one part of the courting that I think we should ignore-"

"Which is?"

Robb leaned forward and kissed Hermione. Her body melted further into his and he drew her closer, then rolled them so she was below. Their breaths intermingling, he stared down at her with a wicked grin and answered, "Well, the whole sex before marriage thing that your world has figured out… I really like it…"

Hermione laughed, loudly. "Are you trying to win me over with sex?"

Robb drew back a bit. "Is it working?" he asked, excitedly.

"I dunno," snorted Hermione, bringing a hand up to trace at the side of Robb's face. "I think I need further convincing…"

"Excellent idea," murmured Robb, descending to kiss Hermione until she was breathless, panting beneath him. Clothes were removed in a hurry, and Robb spent the rest of the evening convincing the witch to stay with him between moans, kisses, and words of love and adoration.

He hoped it would be enough.

He hoped he was enough.

The next day of discussion was going as well as the previous had. Karstark and Umber had teamed up and put their collective feet down, an immovable force that had no intention of allowing any Wildings near their land.

Jon, Robb could tell, was incredibly frustrated by the lack of movement on the discussion. He wanted everyone to get along - something about "Free folk are people, too!" but some prejudices and fears were ingrained too deeply, even when faced with the supernatural.
Thorne, Robb was pleased to note, was not at the lunch meeting. I hope Jon rebuked him, thought Robb viciously, his lingering anger over the man's words at Hermione still enough to wish him ill on the man.

Hermione, on the other hand, was listening intently to Karstark rant about historical precedence of Wilding attacks on his land, her eyes flickering between the older Northern lord and Jon, whose face was growing more despondent as the afternoon progressed.

Finally, she cleared her throat. "Lord Commander," she began, and instantly Karstark snapped his mouth shut.

"Yes?" asked Jon, perking up only a little.

"Could you clarify something for me?"

Confused, Jon nodded. Hermione stood from her seat next to Robb, rummaging through her ever-present beaded bag and pulling out a familiar map. It unrolled across the long table they were seated at, and Robb (along with several others) leaned forward to look at it.

*Oh, he thought. It's the same map that she used to find my siblings.*

Drops of his blood, still as red as when he first pricked his finger, were on the map, only this time, two were at Winterfell and one was at Castle Black. Another was north of the wall, near the Frostfangs, and the other still on the island of Skagos.

Hermione had been adding to it, with her growing knowledge of Westeros. There were more details and holdfasts than when Robb last saw the map, and she had spent some time adding information North of the Wall - so she must have spoken to Maester Aemon or Tarly at some point. She even had numerous towers along the Wall.

"How many of these towers are in use?" she asked, pointing to them along the wall.


"Which means that there are," Hermione paused and counted, "nearly fifteen unused towers. How come?"

Jon glanced at Maester Aemon and Sam, who cleared his throat and spoke, "Lack of numbers, my Lady - and erm, some dark histories in places like the Night Fort-"

"So if you had the numbers to man these towers, would you use them?"

The Black brothers in attendance looked at her like she was crazy, because, obviously, yes, they would. Jon saw the looks and quickly spoke. "Yes, of course - but the numbers we need to not just man the towers, but also repair and staff them, and then produce food-"

"What numbers would you need?"

Jon's mouth shut. He shared a look with Sam, and then with Grenn and Edd, and Tom and a few others he knew before turning back to her and Robb. There was a tiny smirk on Robb's face, indicating that his brother wasn't going to help him any.

"Erm," began Jon, "Maybe a couple thousand?" He cringed. "More would be better."

Satisfied, Hermione crossed her arms. "Then that's your solution."
"I - what? I beg your pardon-"

Hermione ignored Jon and turned to the room at large; Umber was the first to comprehend and began nodded, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "I could live with that."

Shocked, Jon turned to the large man.

"But the repairs-"

"I can do that within a day or so," replied Hermione. "So long as I have material to work with if we need to do full replacements. So, stone or wood, maybe hay." She paused. "We could probably repair all fifteen towers in around two weeks' time."

Maester Aemon thoughtfully hummed from his seat. "That is very kind of you, Lady Hermione. But it still wouldn't help the food situation or any potential issues with discipline."

Hermione shrugged. "I can help with the food. But not the discipline."

"What's going on?" whispered Grenn loudly.

"Lady Hermione has suggested that we let the Wildings use the unused towers," explained Jon with a sigh. "And to help man the Wall against the Others."

"This way, you don't upset those who live the furthest north," explained Hermione, with a nod at Karstark and Umber, "But you also get help in defending the Wall."

"It's a workable solution," agreed Robb.

"But the discipline-"

Jon held up a hand. "We can work with it. Assign towers to different clans. Let them sort things out within. Ensure that the only rules are that they won't venture too far south into someone's land."

"I might be able to help with that," mused Hermione aloud, "But I want to think on it a bit more."

Jon looked around the room hopefully. "So we have a plan? An agreement?"

There were some murmurs, but nothing contentious, and a slow smile stretched on his face. Just then, Patrek Mallister strode into the room, straight toward Robb.

He bent at the waist and muttered into the King's ear, "Your Highness, a group of men just approached the Black Gate. They're asking to meet with you."

Curiously, Robb turned to Mallister. "Who did they say they are?"

Patrek's mouth thinned. "They call themselves the Brotherhood Without Banners. They're led by a man named Beric Dondarrion, whom another man claims, was personally appointed by your father to free the Riverlands from tyranny."

Dazed, Robb blinked a few times. My father? He appointed this man? Why now? Why are they here or all places and not Winterfell?

"Robb?"

The King turned and looked at Hermione, who was peering up at him, biting her lower lip.
"Is everything okay?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," he murmured back, but then cut his eyes to his brother, who was watching worriedly. "Lord Commander - I apologise but something has unexpectedly come up. I will have to cut this discussion short." He glanced around. "Lords Karstark, Umber. Lady Mormont. Uncle-" those he named turned to him. "Would you mind staying and coordinating with the Lord Commander? A schedule perhaps for when Hermione could go by the towers with some Brothers as guides?"

"Of course, Your Highness," answered the Blackfish.

"Excellent. Then please excuse me," said Robb to the room at large, rising from his seat. Those around rose in deference for the King and Robb held a hand out to Hermione. She took it and joined him. "Lord Bolton, Lord Flint - would you accompany us?"

Bolton nodded while Flint, the tall, thin man who rushed back to let Hermione and the others know what Maege had discovered at Castle Black, nodded sharply.

They made their way to the courtyard by the Black Gate, following Patrek Mallister as he kept up a muttered conversation to his King. "They just appeared, Your Highness; none of the scouts saw them coming and with the way that they're dressed and how they walk, they must have been living off the land for some time."

Robb hummed thoughtfully, and then they were there. The group consisted of no more than twenty men in total, of varying shapes and sizes, but they all shared the same petulant, grimy face and stare in their eyes. Their clothing was similar enough that it looked patched together, or at least, that their items were mismatched and taken for whatever value and necessity they warranted rather than style.

A few men, in particular, stood out: a large, rotund bald man in faded red robes with a short beard; a tall and skinny young man with dirty light brown hair that was stringy and long, held back by the bandage that wrapped over his head and across one eye; and a tall man with a quiver on his back and side.

"You asked to see me?" called Robb as he walked forward, coming to a halt a meter or so from the three men that stood out as leaders.

"You are Robb Stark, the King in the North?" the bandaged man asked, stepping forward. He was taller than Robb, but not by much. His skin was pale, so white it was almost translucent and when he spoke, there was an airy, wispy quality to his voice. "Lord Eddard Stark's son?"

Robb nodded. "I am."

There was a brief pause, and then the man who spoke sank to one knee. Immediately, the others behind him did so, too.

Robb paused, blinking as he took in the sight.

"Erm..." Hermione said from just behind him.

The bandaged man looked up, still kneeling. "My liege, I am Beric Dondarrion. Your father sent me with a company of men to find Gregor Clegane and bring him to justice for his crimes. Unfortunately, your father died before we completed our task, so we continued the work. However..."

Dondarrion trailed off, and the man in the red robes spoke up next. His voice was strangely accented. "There has been little for us to do in the Riverlands, Your Highness. Even since that strange wall -
the stone markers - went up…"

"Oh, that was me," said Hermione. "I did that. Erm. Sorry?"

The heads swung in Hermione's direction, and Robb, feeling a bit flustered and annoyed at the continued kneeling, bit out, "Oh, stand up, would you? You don't need to kneel at my feet like that."

Dondarrion was the first to find his feet but swayed. The robed man reached out and steadied him while the other, the tall archer, did so on his other side.

"How was such a feat accomplished?" asked the robed man.

"And what's your name?" broke in Robb, still a bit annoyed. There was something about this ragtag group that rubbed him the wrong way; he was sure they were accomplished men, but - why now? Why are they coming to me now? Where were they before - before the Twins? Before Harrenhal or anywhere else we battled?

The man made a theatrical bow. "Thoros of Myr."

The other man, sensing the need for introductions, added, "Anguy."

"Oh, well, nice to meet you," began Hermione hesitantly, glancing at Robb as she did so and stepping up to be at his side. "As for how I did it; well, magic."

Thoros' eyes lit up. "Magic?" he breathed. "Are you of the priestess of our Lord of the Light? Of Asshai?"

Hermione froze. "Uhh… erm… noo…"

"A different kind of magic witch," nodded Thoros confidently. "From further away."

"Yeah, kind of," agreed Hermione weakly, glancing at Robb who gave a tiny shrug.

Dondarrion spoke again. "Your barrier helped us much, my Lady. We were able to hunt down those who committed crimes against the small folk much easier because of it. And when we heard that Gregor Clegane had died-"

"At the hands of a woman they call the Winter Witch," broke in Thoros with a wide grin, "Is that you, my Lady?"

"-well, there was very little left for us to do," finished Dondarrion. "So we headed North, following rumours of where the Northern army was camped and went to the Wolfswood-"

"- But it was empty." Anguy muttered.

"And moved on toward Winterfell," continued Dondarrion, as though the others had not spoken, his voice remaining monotone. "And then heard of a large battle at Mole Town."

"-Not like there was much else to do southways what with that ghost," muttered Anguy some more.

This time, Dondarrion shot him a look as he finished, "Thus, we headed there, and then on to Castle Black, which brings us to now."

"Now?" queried Robb, hesitantly.

Thoros, Anguy, and Dondarrion all shared a single, quick look before turning back to face Robb.
"To pledge ourselves to you and your cause, Your Highness. The Brotherhood Without Banners is no more - we are now your men. A Brotherhood of the North and Riverlands, just like your own army."

"Oh."

Robb turned to partially look at Bolton, whose eyes flicked just the tiniest bit in deep thought, and then to Robin Flint, who shrugged and said, "We could always use more men."

Mallister, who remained at Hermione's free side, said nothing, and Hermione turned to Robb, murmuring, "It's your call, Your Highness."

Wanting to scowl, but knowing it would do no good, Robb turned back to the ragged men. The three leaders dropped to their knees again. Against my better judgment…

"Very well." He cleared his throat. He peered at the men. "Do you so swear to seek no harm? To commit to crimes? To fight only against evil? To not raise a hand or sword at the innocent, to strike only when you witness wickedness?"

"We so swear," Dondarrion led, with Thoros and Anguy following quickly behind, and the rest of the men parroting the words. A tingle raced up Robb's back and he shivered, just as the wind picked up and snow swirled around them in the courtyard. At his side, Hermione shivered and reached up to rub her arms briskly, looking around warily.

"Then I accept you into my army, as men in good standing," finished Robb with a stately nod. "I offer my protection as your Lord and King; I offer an ear and counsel when it is sought, and I offer a moral cause should we fight."

"My king," replied Dondarrion as he rose. "What would you have us do?"

"Just… find a spot to relax and warm yourself with some ale and bread," said Robb, suddenly tired. "We're finishing up some discussions here with the Night's Watch, and then we'll probably be heading back to Winterfell shortly."

"As you wish," agreed Dondarrion easily. He began to walk away, leading the men. Anguy and Thoros took up point at the end of the cluster when Hermione stopped Anguy with a hand on his arm.

"Sorry," said Hermione suddenly, a quizzical look on her brow. "Did I mishear you earlier? You said something about a ghost?"

Anguy shared a glance with Thoros who scowled and shook his head. "Anguy doesn't know what he speaks of, my Lady-"

"No, I bloody do well know," the other man muttered, turning to Hermione. "There's a ghost. In the Riverlands. A vengeful spirit if I've ever seen one."

"Vengeful? How?" asked Hermione, curious. For all her time in Westeros, she had yet to encounter anything similar to the ghosts at Hogwarts.

Anguy sighed, looking longingly forward as the rest of the Brotherhood melted into one of the nearby towers, seeking refuge from the cold air. "Well, this ghost only hunts a particular house, my Lady," he said hesitantly.

"Which?" asked Bolton, joining the conversation with a sharp bark to his word.
Anguy glanced at him and then said, "House Frey, my Lord," and then excused himself with Thoros with a nod at the five standing shock-still in the courtyard.

"Who could…?" muttered Hermione, reaching up to pinch at her lower lip.

"Dacey?" suggested Mallister, hopefully.

Robb frowned. "Maybe even my Mother, if she survived…"

Bolton shook his head. "It was chaos then, Your Highness. The likelihood is minuscule."

Robb sighed deeply. "But a ghost only picking off Freys? They must be a friend of ours."

"Or they want us to think that," argued Hermione quietly. "We just won't know unless we find them and ask."

"Can you even ask a ghost something?" asked Mallister quietly.

"It's hardly a ghost if they're killing," replied Robin Flint waspishly.

A shout of "King Robb! Your Highness!" interrupted them, and they turned to see a young teen, a Black Brother, skidding on some snow as he dashed toward them. He caught himself on a wooden fence, righted himself, and continued forward.

Robb groaned. "Oh, what now?"

"My a-pologies, Your H-Highness," stuttered the young Night's Watch brother as he skidded to a halt before the newly large group. He glanced at the frowning King and then deliberately shifted his attention to Hermione. "The Lord Commanded h-has requested the Lady H-Hermione."

"Whatever for?" asked Robb curtly.

"It's - it's the Baratheons, Y-your H-Highness," the young man said, eyes skittering to Robb. "Lord Baratheon has returned."

"Then what does he need me for?" asked Hermione, confused. "Is Lord Baratheon asking for me? Are some people hurt?"

The man grimaced. "The numbers are… they lost most of their men, my Lady."

There was a sharp inhale of air around the group.

"But he took nearly all his soldiers!" protested Edd, eyes wide. "That was nearly five thousand men. How many remain?"

"A-A bare thousand, if at that, Ser," the teen said, revealing his Southern heritage in the title when addressing Eddard Karstark. "A-And most w-won't make it through the night."

Hermione sighed. "What about Lord Baratheon? And the woman with him - the Red Witch?"

The teen shook his head. "The W-Witch Melisandre is w-with Lord Baratheon, but it doesn't look good, my Lady. That is why she a-asked the Lord Commander for your h-help."

Hermione and Robb shared a glance. "You'd best go," he finally said, his voice pitched low. "But be careful. I don't trust that Baratheon doesn't have something planned."
"You don't have to warn me," snorted Hermione, shaking her head. "That Red Priestess from Asshai bothers me. I don't trust her at all."

"Take men with you," continued Robb, looking around. "Edd, of course. Lyra, Brienne and -" he grimaced, "the Kingslayer, too. He might not be able to fight, but he's clever and can suss out most soldiers and plans. Perhaps Mallister and Hornwood?"

"And who does that leave you with?" asked an amused Hermione. She reached up and kissed his cheek. "I'll be fine, Your Majesty. Take care of yourself, too, you know?" She turned to the teen and said, "Lead on."

Robb sighed as she walked away, a small entourage with her. It wasn't enough in Robb's mind, but there was little more he could do other than order her away - and Hermione wouldn't do that. He turned back to the Brotherhood and his council who remained. "Let's adjourn to my quarters. I want to speak with Lord Cerwyn about how preparations for Winter are going at Winterfell, and to see if we can find places for you and your men, Lord Dondarrion."

The man nodded shallowly, his pale face whiter than the snow on the ground around them. "You have my thanks, your Highness."

The trip to Robb and Hermione's rooms was without interruption, although there was an increase in activity around Castle Black as the remaining Black Brothers wandered to and fro quickly, with bundles of wool blankets or pails of water, all heading towards the great hall and largest of the towers - presumably where they were setting up a makeshift infirmary for Stannis' men.

Once in his room, Robb sighed a breath of relief, glancing at Grey Wind who was lounging on his bed, in the middle of a nap. The wolf whined in his sleep and rolled onto his side, his back leg kicking at something in his dream.

"Now, my Lords," began Robb, moving toward his desk that he shared with Hermione (although her side was notably messier than his), "Take a seat - I'll call up Lord Cerwyn -"

"Call?" he heard Thoros of Myr mutter.

Robb withdrew his mirror and propped it up. "Cley Cerwyn," he called clearly, watching the glass shift and melt until the man in question appeared.

Blinked.

Cerwyn's appearance was frazzled, his eyes wide and his cry of, "Your Highness!" was full of terror and panic.

"Lord Cerwyn, are you alright?" asked Robb, leaning forward a bit. Around him, Bolton and Maege Mormont mimicked him.

"I - ah - oh, um," the man stuttered, his eyes darting everywhere until the closed and he sighed. "Forgive me, Your Highness."

"What for?" asked Robb cautiously.

"It seems that I have..." the man swallowed thickly. "Misplaced the Princesses and Princess Sansa's shield, Clegane."

"Misplaced?" repeated an incredulous Robb.
Cerwyn winced. "Princess Arya never arrived for her next lesson, and when searching, we discovered that Princess Sansa was missing as well. Along with Clegane."

"You don't suppose the Hound's kidnapped them?" asked a horrified Brotherhood member.

"Let's not be hasty," said Robb with a sharp glance around the room. He moved directly to Hermione's beaded bag and withdrew the map she had been using for the towers and keeping an eye on him and his siblings. He unfurled it and between his hands, stretched it out.

_There_, he thought, spotting both Bran and Rickon's unchanged dots, same as his at Castle Black. But Sansa and Arya were just -

He blanched.

"Your Highness?!"

"They're here," he said through bloodless lips that quickly compressed in annoyance. He looked up from the map. "They're bloody _here._"

"At Castle Black?" blinked Bolton in surprise. His face turned impassive again quickly as he turned to face the door. "How curious…"

"Bolton, go get them and bring them here. And take Clegane's sword if he's with them," ordered Robb. "I wouldn't be surprised if they took a Portkey that was left over. Especially to get here so quickly."

"Port Key?" asked Thoros of Myr with a deep frown. He separated the foreign word into two parts. "What is that?"

"Nevermind that just yet," snapped Robb, rolling the map up and shoving it back in Hermione's bag. "Finding out what the hell my sisters are doing is more important."

"Uh - yes, your Grace…"

Soon after, Bolton returned with a perturbed Clegane, who stood above everyone else in the room and at the back of two young women, Robb was not happy to see.

"Hello, Robb!" greeted Sansa with a wide smile. Arya gave a tiny wave and radiated smugness.

"Sansa. Arya." Robb's eyes cut over both, and quickly Sansa's smile slipped from her face, just as Arya's smug demeanour shifted to worried.

"Aren't you happy to see us?" demanded Arya, hands on her hips.

Robb grit his teeth. "Oh, ecstatic."

Sansa didn't miss the sarcasm. "Honestly, Robb, we do have a reason-"

"And it better be a good one," interrupted Robb, sitting behind his desk. He summoned every part of him that he considered kingly, letting the role settle on his shoulders. Sansa and Arya blanched and he knew that _they knew_ that he wasn't happy. "So. Let's hear it, then."

---

Hours later, Hermione wiped the sweat off her face with the sleeve of her shirt and warily looked around the great hall that they turned into an infirmary. Some men were still crying or calling out in pain, but Hermione found that she could only stun the men for so long before their infections or the
pain from their amputated limbs pushed through her spell.

The room was warm, with fires roaring in the two fireplaces on either side of the long, rectangular hall, and there was a cloyingly sick smell of death that hung over everyone. Hermione felt rather tired, and the heat and smell were not helping. She had transfigured many of the tables and benches in the room into cots for the wounded, and others who could be spared were quickly wrapping up bodies and carrying them out for burning just as quickly as Hermione thought she was healing others.

"You're going to wear yourself out," muttered Edd as he sidled up to her.

"There's still more to be done," muttered back Hermione, glancing at him from under sweat-dampened curls that stuck to her forehead. She glanced down at her wand with a scowl. "I've only got so much magic in me, too, you know."

"As opposed to the Red Priestess," said Edd, and together they turned to look at the woman, who was chanting over one of Baratheon's men, intoning something in a foreign language before she touched the man's forehead. His eyes rolled back and he fell limp onto the cot.

"Show off," muttered Hermione.

Edd's mouth twitched. "Careful now, my Lady. Are you jealous?"

Hermione scowled. "Hardly."

Edd opened his mouth to say something further, but his eyes caught on something past her shoulder and he froze, his eyes growing wide and round. He suddenly stood straight, and a hand came up to smooth down any flyaway hair from his tied back bun.

Hermione narrowed her eyes on him and then turned. "Sansa?"

Following behind the redhead was Arya, who pushed past with a deep-set scowl and crossed arms until she made her way to the far wall, near where Brienne and Jaime sat by the larder door. The young Princess threw herself on the bench beside Brienne and slouched down.

Baffled, Hermione turned from Arya to Sansa. "What on Earth are you doing here?"

Sansa's cheeks pinkened. "Arya and I thought it would be a good idea to come help. To see the aftermath of a battle - especially if this winter is going to be harsh. We wanted to help. We brought further provisions from Winterfell…"

"What did Robb have to say about this?"

The pink on Sansa's cheeks flushed red.

"Oh dear," said Hermione quietly. She glanced back at Edd and saw that he was doing his best to look everywhere but at Sansa. She turned back to the older Princess and said, "Listen; there's no much you can do in here, so why don't you take a list of things I still need to Maester Aemon and Sam Tarly? They can send a runner to me here and you can spend the rest of the evening with them in the library."

Sansa's shoulders dropped. "Am I really that useless?"

"What?" Hermione's mouth dropped open. "No! Not at all. But do you know anything about healing?"
"No…"

"Then it's more like logistics. You are best put elsewhere," replied Hermione with a smile. She reached forward and put her hands on both of Sansa's shoulders. "Really. Now -" she summoned a parchment and quill, and quickly wrote down a few items - blankets, scrap cloth, buckets for hot water - and handed it to Sansa. "Take Clegane with you - he's here, isn't it? - and Edd, too."

"What?" squawked Edd. Both women turned to look at him. He quickly cleared his throat and repeated, "But I'm supposed to stay here and guard you, Lady Hermione-

"Brienne and Jaime are here," replied Hermione, glancing their way. Brienne was solemn-faced as she spoke to Arya, but there was a grin on Jaime's face. He was clearly enjoying the younger girl's unhappiness.

Edd stared at Hermione. "The Kingslayer can't fight."

"Well, he could probably annoy someone to death," argued Hermione happily. "And given that the majority of the people in this room are either dying or too ill to fight, I think I'll be fine."

"If you say so…" still, Edd sent her a skeptical look.

"I am. Now, shoo!" She waved both Sansa and Edd off, and while Edd kept looking back, he was soon only looking forward and ushering Sansa out of the infirmary with Hermione's list.

She sighed deeply and turned to the soldier at the next bed. "What's your name?" she asked him, looking down at a familiar, weathered face. "Oh! You're… you're the one who came in with Stannis Baratheon before."

The man was sitting up in his cot and nodded. He looked tired, with a bruise by his temple and splatters of blood around his neck. A hand was pressed at his side where a stained scrap cloth had soaked up whatever blood was oozing from his body. Hermione knelt and gingerly peeled it away from the man's side. He hissed.

"Seaworth," he said through gritted teeth. "Davos Seaworth."

"Well, let's get this cleaned up, shall we, Ser Seaworth?" asked Hermione genially.

"It's not - I'm no Ser," the man replied, just as Hermione swished her wand and cast a nonverbal *tergeo*, siphoning the blood up and off his body to see the wound. She flicked and the blood went straight to a nearby bucket with a loud *splat*.


She had some salt from the provisions they brought from Winterfell. Hermione fished out the tiny leather bag of it that she brought to the infirmary earlier and used *gemino* to duplicate the contents to fill the bag further. Every time she did so, it lost some of its molecular integrity, but there was still enough before the salt she was using was nothing more than white-coloured rock without mineral properties.

She cast *scourgify* on the cloth, vanishing the blood and disinfecting it, and then transferred the salt to the clean cloth. Without warning, she smacked to it the man's side and stuck it there with a sticking charm.

Davos Seaworth let out a loud shout and a couple of curses. "The Seven Hells, woman!"
"It'll stay and do its job," she replied evenly, rising to her feet.

The man sighed. "Aye, it will."

She gathered up the leather bag, tying it shut neatly when a hoarse shout from behind her had her turn and asked, "What's going on?" but she froze, the words dying on her tongue.

On a cot, several rows over, one of the Black Brothers was being held up by a hand tightly clenched around his throat. The brother was scrambling at the hand holding him, raking his nails across the skin until it broke, but the hand did not bleed.

Hermione let her eyes travel down the arm to the Baratheon soldier in the cot, who had sat up like a stiff board. Around his waist was the half-sewed death shroud the brothers were converting from blankets and cloaks - the man had been dead, and the brother was in the process of his funeral preparations.

But now he's not dead, thought Hermione stupidly, just as the corpse turned its head from staring at the now slackened face of the brother to look at her. Its bright blue eyes shone eerily in the hall.

Then, there was a clatter and a cry. Hermione whipped her head around and another dead body, this one struggling to rip through its shroud, had rolled and knocked off the cot and onto the floor, where it wriggled near a man with a missing eye. He was shrieking as he hopped off his bed. His vision impaired, he ended up stumbling onto the cot behind him, just as that man, who had died moments earlier, opened his blue eyes and wrapped two hands around the man's neck, and then twisted it with a loud pop.

It was a mad rush as those who could stand up and began to turn around, banding together as more and more of the dead, those that the brothers hadn't yet got to for the shrouds rose up from their cots, while others ripped through theirs. A few cries could be heard from outside the infirmary - perhaps some of the dead on their way to the fire pit started moving? thought Hermione morbidly.

"My Lord! King Stannis!"

Hermione hauled Davos up as one of the blue-eyed dead men flopped off the bed, unable to do more than crawl at them with his missing legs. Davos made a distressed sound, and Hermione turned to him. He was staring across the room at where Stannis was resting, with several of his advisors around him. Melisandre was flitting between other Baratheon soldiers and her King and was on the other side of the room, near the main door, when the cry broke through the room.

The men parted, with one of them gurgling as a dagger went through his throat. He dropped to the floor, like a puppet with its strings cut. From where they stood, Davos and Hermione could see right at Stannis. His square jaw was unmistakable, but the bright blue eyes were not the Baratheon blue he had previously.

"What's going on?" she muttered.

"It's the dead!" cried one Black brother, withdrawing his sword. "Someone send up the call! Blow the horn! Three times! It's the dead! The wights are here!"

Hermione inhaled sharply, and Davos, at her side, shuddered. Her nails ended up digging into his arm, and she asked, her voice barely shaking, "Do you have a weapon on you?"

"No," he said, his voice strained. He paused. "Do you?"

Relief spread through Hermione. These were not Inferi - they might be similar, but she was a witch
and she knew how to combat the dead. "Oh, yes. Yes, I do."

And with that, Hermione pushed the sleeves of her shirt up and stepped forward, away from Davos, staring down the numerous bright blue eyes as they turned toward her.

TBC...
Winter Witch

II - XII

Hermione extended her wand arm to the nearest Inferi, pointing the tip at it. The lumbering corpse scuttered a bit as it hit the edge of a cot, but then listed to the side and moved toward her, reaching forward with its arms. It was still in the earthy Baratheon colours that marked its origins, but Hermione moved past that. There was no point thinking of the man the soldier had been, but rather what he was now.

She narrowed her eyes. "Inflamarae," she whispered, concentrating on the walking corpse as she spoke the spell.

Hot, blue-tinged flames burst from her wand in a pinprick stream, slamming into the Inferi with all the force of a solid punch, sending it reeling back for a moment, off-kilter. It then began to scream, shrilly, as the blue flames engulfed the figure. Moments later, with the heat and strength of the spell, the corpse soon disintegrated.

Although they were rather mindless, the remaining wights and those who reanimated as they "died," soon turned to look in Hermione's direction.

She swallowed thickly and turned to mutter at Davos, "Get to the others."

She didn't see the man, but she heard him mutter, "right," and felt the air displace as he picked his way around the cots, sometimes stepping on them, as he moved away from her.

"Now then," she said, turning back to the growing number of dead. She refused to count, but there were more than two dozen, of varying shapes and sizes. She was only thankful that this was the infirmary, and that none had access to their usual weapons. "Who's next?"

Hermione's eyes travelled the room, taking in the clusters of living: a few of Stannis Baratheon's men, advisors or aides-de-camp of some sort, were reeling from the reanimation of their liege, with two mustering their courage and another one pleading for Stannis to "come back to us, Sire, please! Please don't, your Highness—" until the man's last words gurgled as his head was ripped from his body by a wight that snuck up behind him.

Brienne and Arya were the only two with swords by the larder, but Jaime Lannister had picked up a
cast-iron pan from somewhere (presumably, from the larder itself, which might or might have doubled as a pantry), and was swinging it at any nearby wights with his left-hand with zest.

Davos was picking his way across the floor, carefully sticking to the walls as he beat back any wights that came close to him with the legs of a chair he had picked up. The leg ends were red with blood and bits of cloth, indicating that he was stabbing and goring any of the dead that came close.

The last few survivors of the room, two Black Brothers, and Melisandre were on the far side, the furthest from everyone else, having been giving last rites when the men began to turn. There was one Black Brother left, but he was shifty looking, and took one glance around the room and made a break for an open window, jumping out of it with a shrill cry. His companion stared after him, mouth agape, until he turned around, only to be pounced upon by two corpses. His own screams rent through the air and Hermione found herself swallowing back bile.

Melisandre seemed calm and collected amongst the chaos, but even from where she stood, Hermione could tell her eyes were a bit wider than normal and she was nervous with how they darted around, looking for an exit.

*The others can hold their own for now,* she thought, and thrust out her free hand at a nearby corpse, thinking *expulso.* The dead body went flying back into three others, bowling them over comically. Hermione stared down at her hand in amazement. *I've never managed wandless magic to that extent before!*

She blinked a few times, then remembered she was in the middle of a battle and looked up, her face hardening. The snarls of the three wights she had knocked over told Hermione that she just made herself a target, more than she had been before as they struggled to get back to their feet.

*Can they think? Are they mindlessly drive by hunger like in the Muggle movies? Are they being controlled by something or by a thought?* She wondered, eyes narrowed as one on a cot struggled to free itself from its death shroud, only to tip over directly toward Hermione, its jaw working soundlessly to gnaw at her.

She hopped backward, her heart pounding in her chest with panic and fear. In response, her wand tip touched the corpse's forehead as flames burst from it with shrill, "*incendio!*," scorching the face black and melting what was underneath. The corpse flopped back, unmoving.

"Ugh," gagged Hermione, her face twisting in disgust as she brought her free hand up to cover her mouth from the sight and smell.

Two more Inferi crossed the room, one listing badly to the side with its uneven body weight from a missing limb to its shoulder — the human must have bled out before help could arrive to cauterize the wound — with its other hand outstretched.

"*Reducto!*" The outstretched limb went flying, landing somewhere out of Hermione's line of sight. "*Reducto! Inflamarae!*"

Her spells hit with precision and direction that Hermione had only seen before in Harry, Dumbledore, and perhaps Remus, when duelling. As someone who once failed her final defense exam, a part of Hermione wondered at her newfound ability and skill to hit her marks — but another part worried about it and shuddered at the idea of the magic of Westeros, and the Wall, affecting her.

However, she had no time to consider her fears regarding her magic and abilities, as a cold, clammy hand grabbed her shoulder and spun her around harshly, yanking it from its socket.
Hermione bit back a loud cry of pain at the pop and agonizing sensation, only to smell foul breath and see bright blue eyes of a wight invade her space, looming forward and down toward her.

With a hoarse cry, Hermione physically shoved the dead, but the body was solid and unmoving. Panic mounted as one hand went to her hair, winding its hand — which was slowly turning dark blue — into the strands.

A voice, baffled and incredulous, and ridiculously high-pitched, sparked a memory from her past when it pierced the panic in her brain: Are you a witch or not?

I'm a witch, thought Hermione, taking a breath and then narrowing her eyes on the wight.

It was over quickly, in three moves: her wand came up with a violent slash as red danced across Hermione’s vision. The limb attached to the hand in her hair slackened as her cutting curse smoothly cut through the cool flesh, making the wight wobble. Then, she sent the corpse back a few feet with her expulso, enough that the bones within its fleshy shell shattered due to its close proximity, making the corpse collapse down on itself; and then finally she lit the thing on fire.

The hand still in her hair, however, moved independently of its body and clenched tight.

"Ow!" she cried, reaching up and casting petrificus totalus on it, freezing the limb and then breaking its fingers as she yanked it from her head, taking a few clumps of hair with it.

Irrationally angry, she stomped on the hand a few times before setting it on fire as well. Her anger manifested itself in the spell, and the severed arm quickly turned to greying dust.

By the time Hermione made her way across the room to the other woman's side, she was panting, half with anger, and half with necessity, as all her lighting of the corpses was turning the room hazy with smoke.

Melisandre had somehow managed to channel her own powers in the meantime - whatever they were from her so-called Lord of the Light, R'hllor - and her hands were superheated, giving off an intense wave of heat that scorched the skin off any wight that came close to her.

The red-haired woman glanced dispassionately at Hermione when they finally stood side-by-side, the curly-haired witch staring down the next cluster of dead as they blocked the door out of the infirmary.

"I thought they called you the winter witch," the other woman commented lightly. The smell of burning flesh was pungent and sickening in the room, the ceiling awash of the thin haze of smoke that was building too quickly to escape through the chimney stack or two open windows.

Hermione spared a quick glance at the Red Priestess and then flicked her wand at a wight that came close to snap at her. A whip of burning fire lashed out and bisected the corpse through his Black Brother robes and leathers, cauterizing the flesh and sending the two parts to the floor in squishy splats. However, the corpse was still moving and a flick of her wand ensured flames engulfed the two pieces while its arms flailed.

"You'll find I'm full of surprises," replied Hermione.

Melisandre quirked her eyebrows at the younger woman. "I am learning that."

Together, they turned back to face the oncoming walkers; Hermione's magic gave her the ability to fight from afar, but for Melisandre, hers was mainly defense and up-close. She would not be useful in a fight.
Instead, Hermione cast *incendio*, thinking of corralling her magic and the fire only to the dead, and watched as red and orange flames greedily licked up from the floor in a swooshing spiral of fire, which soon immersed one corpse, and then another, until the five before her were writhing and then, soon, dust.

A path cleared to leave the room. Hermione turned to Melisandre. "You need to leave."

A withering glare demonstrated Melisandre's thoughts on the topic.

"You're not helping anyone here!" argued Hermione. "Go and warn everyone else and tell them fire will slow them down until they chop these things up like firewood. It's the best option they have to survive!"

The Priestess glanced around the room, which was smoky — it was hard to see anything, but there were still some shapes moving in the haze that burned her eyes. Stannis, however, his body was nothing more than ash being scattered by the boots of the dead or living, now.

She nodded and left without saying anything to Hermione, sweeping out of the room, the red of her hair, dress, and billowing sleeves the most visible part of the woman as the smoke enveloped her.

Hermione pursed her lips. "Rude," she muttered.

Then, she turned. Davos, Brienne, Jaime, Arya and two other surviving aides-de-camp from Stannis Baratheon's army (who had been by his bedside), had banded together by the larder while Hermione systematically moved through the dead toward Melisandre, the one who had been furthest from the others.

The room was still overrun with dead, the majority having split to face Hermione while the rest moved toward the others who were barely coping with one (and a half) swords, a chair, and a frying pan as weapons against the onslaught.

Hermione hissed in agitation. At least a dozen corpses were between her and the others. Hermione raised her wand and made a swirling, loop movement, watching as a lasso of fire steadily grew and swished around her in graceful arcs. The corpses paused in their steady but slow advance.

"Oh, so you do have the ability to think," she murmured, logging the information. "Good to know — but not enough to help you from this."

Then she snapped her wand out, and let the flaming lasso of brilliantly hot white flame go. It sparked blue and red as the lasso cracked through the air, slamming against five dead in one go, its lash hitting lengthwise and burning right through where it hit. Immediately, the clothing worn by the wights burst into flame and the armour from two of them began to melt, dripping pools of dark silver liquid that ran down their fronts and legs even as they burned. Their weight was unable to sustain the melted and dusty mass from above and soon collapsed down, merging with the liquid armour.

Hermione snapped the lasso back to her, letting it retract into her wand (but it remained sparking, ready to be lashed out), and turned on her heel to Apparate over to the others by the larder. As she spun in her Apparition, she released the flame lasso spell, and in her re-entry in front of the others, she allowed her spin to continue with her momentum and the lasso to strike at the nearest corpses, turning them into giant balls of flame as the dead shrieked.

The heat from her spells and the smoke in the room burned at Hermione's cheeks, flushing her and turning the skin rough. It was like being out too long in the sun and getting a tan, knowing that she'd peel later and suffer from the burn. Sweat dried before it could drip or pool, but the others didn't fare
as well as her.

Brienne was red in the face, constantly shifting her hands on her hilt as the metal heated under her warm hands and in the heat of the room. She was wearing her full armour - as Brienne normally did - and Hermione could see the sweat pooling around her neck and arms.

She must be stifling in that, the witch thought, casting a cooling charm on her immediately. The other woman sighed in relief.

"My thanks, Lady Hermione," the tall blond replied stiffly.

"Thanks?" blurted out Jaime, his eyes wild as he looked around the room. Some of the dead were nothing more than piles of dust, while others flailed about and landed on cots, lighting the blankets on fire. "We're in a wooden room! We're going to die because she's fire-happy! I'd say she's a fucking Targaryen if I hadn't seen her wield more ice than fire before!"

"We're not going to die," replied Hermione, turning so her back was no longer to the Inferi behind her. Her lasso had taken out five, but those five had tried to evade the flames that engulfed them and had bumped into other wights, setting off a chain reaction that took out at least three more. The rest were keeping some distance, for the moment.

"We bloody are if you keep lighting them on fire!" the blond shot back angrily. The burning corpses were turning to ash and collapsing in on themselves as he spoke. "A sword would be a much better weapon—"

"Oh, I'm sorry," mocked Hermione, shooting him a glare. "Let me just pull my sword out and begin slashing at a bunch of zombies with the zero training that I've had!"

Jaime snarled back at her. "You don't need training when you've got knights with you—"

"Are you counting yourself in that number, Kingslayer?" one of the surviving Baratheon aides-de-camp snapped with a glower as he poked at a curious wight that came close to his end of the cluster with a broken chair leg. The dead were no longer hanging back.

"Can we all just shut up?!" hollered Davos instead, shaking his chair as the horde of undead began to press in. "We're about to die and you're bitchin' about weapons!"

"If I had my hand—"

Hermione finally had enough, spinning around and ignoring a corpse that lunged forward, only to be skewered by Brienne as the sword went through its mawing mouth.

"You were a great swordsman! You've been practicing with your other hand with Brienne!" shouted Hermione, leaning forward with her short stature to get in Jaime's face. "What. The. Fuck. Is. Wrong. With. You!"

Something stricken passed over Jaime's face as he stared down at her. "I—I don't deserve to live, not after what I've done — what good is a bitter knight?"

Temper gone, Hermione pushed herself on her toes, inches from Jaime's face and screamed, "Regain your fucking honour then and pick up something and FIGHT!"

The Kingslayer reeled back, hitting the doorjamb behind him as Hermione's hair sparked and there was a swell of thick, hazy air that had nothing to do with the smoke. Jaime couldn't breathe, feeling like something was pressing down on his chest, hard and he opened his mouth wide to pant, to take
in whatever air he could, but there were spots in his vision, black ones, and his hand — oh, Gods, his hand, the one that was cut off — it was burning, burning and it was agonizing, just as bad when it was first cut —

Then it was all over and Jaime could breathe again. He looked down, flexing his phantom right hand, but his fingertips touched something solid and looked down, staring. A golden hand, flexible, moveable, like a read one, took the place of his missing appendage. It felt and moved like his hand was there, and if it weren't for the golden colour, Jaime would swear he had his hand back.

He looked up at Hermione. "What—"

Her stare, blazing hot, reflecting the fire around them. "Act honourably, Jaime Lannister, and the hand will remain with you." Her mouth was a tight line and there were stress lines around. "So pick up a sword, Ser Jaime, and fight for the living!"

Mouth open, he stared at Hermione for a long moment even as she swirled to face a wight, wand blazing as she blasted it back.

Jaime glanced around the room, spotted a fallen sword from one of the Baratheon men around Stannis' bed, and darted forward, low. His shoulder slammed into a wight that went up and over him, landing hard on the floor. It screeched something and then Brienne was there, stabbing it, but the creature scrambled up, pushing itself up the blade without feeling any pain and she panicked, eyes wide as she yanked the sword back —

Then his hand grabbed the hilt and the sword, an extension of his arm, his body, his thoughts, was slashing through the nearest wight and there was a grin on his mouth and something was laughing, laughing loudly in joy —

Oh, he thought, it's me. I'm the one laughing.

Then he was on his feet and it was like the past few months had never happened. Nothing but conviction coursed through his veins, the deep, desiring need to eradicate the enemy in front of him, to destroy every undead wight in the room.

Between him, Brienne, and Hermione, who burnt the corpses as Jaime and Brienne worked together to hack at them, with Arya darting forward like a sly rattlesnake with her Needle, they managed to dismember the corpses and burn them to ash in short order.

They were all breathing heavily when the room cleared.

The six of the survivors in the room looked at each other for a moment, exchanging glances. Brienne and Jaime were breathing heavily, their faces flushed, but nothing could wipe the smile off Jaime’s face. He kept looking down and flexing his new golden hand in awe. Arya was rocking on the balls of her feet while Davos stood at her shoulder, keeping a close eye on the girl as if he knew she would dart off.

Someone coughed.

"Is it over?" hoarsely whispered a surviving Baratheon soldier. His partner, who shouted at Jaime earlier, had been one of the wights they killed.

The acrid smoke burnt his lungs but Jaime stood tall, his shoulders back. He nodded at the man. "It is."

The Baratheon soldier sighed a breath of relief.
"In here at least," added Hermione, glancing out the main doorway, making him whimper instead.

Everyone turned as one to the doorway.

"Shall we?" asked Hermione, and then she was striding forward, leaving the infirmary that was filled with nothing but ash and smoke, and a few free burning cots. As she passed those, the fires snuffed out, the air sucked away from them in a strong cyclone that diminished the fire completely. Wisps of smoke wafted up in a gentle motion that dissipated as people walked by.

There was no one in the hallway beyond the great hall, but there was some distant shouting further away.

"Do you think the Red Priestess was able to warn the others?" asked Arya quietly, jogging a bit to catch up to Hermione and to walk at her side.

"I hope so."

"Me too," whispered Arya. She tightened her grip around her sword.

"Whatever it is, be ready out there," replied Hermione, glancing down at the girl and then raising her wand just slightly so she could bring the tip of quickly if necessary.

They reached the end of the hallway, where two large, closed doors barred the way out. Hermione paused in front of them. "Ready?" she asked the others.

Brienne and Jaime raised their swords in response, with Arya mimicking them. Davos raised his chair, a determined but resigned look on his face, while the Baratheon soldier swallowed thickly and clutched at his improvised club from a chair leg.

With a final nod, she used her wand to open the doors, and they burst from the hallway together as a group, eyes casting around the courtyard. It was mayhem.

Several Black Brothers had been carting the dead from the infirmary to a burning fire pit in the middle of the courtyard. Due to that, there were bodies strewn everywhere, some mangled and many more fresh kills. Those that had the majority of their bodies intact were rising, eerie blue eyes focusing on the nearest living thing before they moved after it.

There were screams and shouts throughout the castle, reminiscent of the Wildlings attack a week and a bit earlier.

Immediately, Hermione turned to Davos and the Baratheon soldier. "It seems that there are more dead inside Castle Black. We can't let them escape. Seaworth, and erm — you — sorry, I never got your name—"

"Tarbor," the soldier stuttered. "Khort Tarbor."

"Right, Seaworth and Tarbor will go to the gate and make sure it stays closed," she instructed.

Davos nodded while Tarbor swallowed thickly, his face pale white as he muttered some sort of agreement. Hermione took it at face value as the two gingerly picked their way across the courtyard in the shadows between the torches and out of the light from the bonfire and then around a corner, disappearing from view. She turned to Brienne, Jaime, and Arya.

"Are we going to kill some wights?" asked Arya eagerly.
Hermione blinked. "Erm. Yes."

"Yes!" she crowed in excitement, evening pumping her free fist in the air.

"We need to find the others," continued Hermione, looking at Arya strangely before turning to the two other adults. "We need to find Jon Snow - and Robb. The guards and anyone else who was in the castle."

"And the Priestess," added Jaime, his voice low. "She should've warned people."

"The only dead were those who came in," added Brienne. "So she should have managed to get past those bodies in the courtyard before there was too much panic."

"Yes, but," agreed Hermione, stepping forward and peering ahead at the large pile of bodies. Some were charred, but many were not. "It doesn't seem like they got a chance to start the bonfire."

Brienne grimaced.

Jaime didn't hold back on his opinion. "Lovely." He sighed. "Well, let's go then."

He led the charge out, his blade slashing through the nearest, open-mouth wight as it lumbered toward them, mouth open. He cleanly bisected the corpse and following him, Brienne's sword came crashing down, rendering the corpse armless.

Arya seemed to be having the time of her life, spearing any separated limbs as arms attempted to wiggle away, holding them in place with Needle or her boot until Hermione's wand sent a splash of flame to incinerate the limb.

The methodological extermination of wights soon caught the attention of those remaining in the courtyard, and Hermione realized they had fallen prey to the common errors found in Muggle horror films: you don't survive a zombie apocalypse if you're overrun.

There were at least three rows deep of wights that continued to advance. Their slow walk allowed Hermione's panic to rise. Other wights, attracted to the noise and perhaps fresh targets, wandered into the courtyard. On one hand, the more that came for them was less that went for others.

Or everyone else is dead, a part of her brain supplied.

"Merlin!" she gasped, jumping back a bit as one wight got close enough to rip at her overcoat, the black material tight in its grasp. Behind her, she felt her back just brush against the wall of one of the towers.

"Seven Hells," swore Arya. "How many of them are there?"

"Stannis's army had nearly a thousand men come back," shouted back Brienne between stabs, "And almost all of them died or were near death!"

"Wonderful," griped Jaime, a scowl on his face. He stabbed at a fresh corpse and blood splattered back at him, making him sputter and hastily wipe it off with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Don't let them near you!" Hermione shouted at the other three.

Brienne and Jaime fought back to back as the thick line of dead advanced, while Arya's short stature allowed her to slip between wights and their bodies, aiming from underneath with her stabs. Hermione could hear Arya muttering something under her breath. "Quick as a snake! Light as a
feather!

"Why didn't I think of that?" snarked back Jaime, breathing just a touch heavier than normal.

"Well, just be pleased they're not the zombies back home," countered Hermione.

Brienne paused just briefly from her swing. "In your world, my Lady?"

"Yes, do elaborate," muttered Jaime. "As I need clarification on this: you keep changing their names. They're *wights*. But you've called them Inferi and zombies—"

"Oh, well, that's easy to explain," began Hermione, almost cheerfully as she slipped into academic vernacular. "There really is no difference; they all tend to mean the same thing: a walking corpse that has been resurrected—"

She had to break out to shout *incendio*, stepping in front of those with her as she swept her arm in a wide gesture, the flames bursting from the wand tip with a searing heat. The speed and force of the flame pushed Hermione's hair back and she felt her cheeks burn from the heat. Instantly, the wights in front of her were consumed.

That pushed the oncoming line of wights; arms outstretched over the shoulders of those in front, back just the tiniest amount for breathing room.

"—anyway, where was it? Oh, yes; in wizarding terms, an *inferi* refers to a corpse that has been resurrected through Necromancy, which is, for a lack of a better term, death magic," continued Hermione, not breaking from where she finished off previously. She viciously stabbed her wand forward and a nearby wight screamed as it was consumed by flame.

Brienne levelled a wide-eyed stare at Hermione in response.

"And you call these *wights* mainly because that is the terminology you are used to," the witch continued, using nonverbal spells. The flame lasso extended past her wand tip and buried itself into the oncoming horde, but when Hermione flicked it back, it merely caught the edges of the wights and burned through their ragged clothing, or merely singed the amour from the soldiers. The previous dead they destroyed were Night's Watch brothers or men without body armour, but that was beginning to change.

Jaime swore as his sword dented a chest plate but did not pierce through the gap between the chest and neck.

"Now, *zombies* can just cover about anything," finished Hermione. "Unlike us, who apparently need to spread ourselves out or else we're going to die."

This time, Jaime did a spit-take and loudly called over his shoulder, "Excuse me?!"

"Divide and conquer, I think!" replied Hermione, just as cheerfully, and spun on her heel to Apparate out of the semi-circle the dead were making around her, Brienne, Jaime, and Arya.

"Witch! Witch, you come back here—!"

Hermione appeared in an empty part of the courtyard. "No need to hold back," she murmured, and let her arms spread wide as she thought, *incendio maximus*. Instead of the jets of concentrated fire, or the bluebell sparks she had previously used, a wall of flame burst from her wand and split, growing in size and height until there was a curtain wall before her. She sent it forward with a directed flicked of her wand and began walking with it.
Despite the scent of burning flesh or the sizzle that came with melting steel, Hermione felt giddy with her spell work, especially as the back rows that had advanced on the others were disintegrating almost immediately as the wall moved through them. Others on the fringe of the curtain wall became human candles, wailing and bouncing off one another as they flailed in their spots or fell over fences or into buildings. Hermione allowed herself a momentary respite.

Of course, that was when a wight knocked her over.

Hermione hit the cobblestones, hard, and her mind immediately flashed back to the battle of Castle Black earlier, when Ygritte had knocked her to the ground. At the time, she was consumed with magic and battle lust, but now fear crept into her as the vacant expression of a soldier leered at her, its blackened and freezing hands wrapping around her throat.

The bright blue eyes bore into Hermione's amber ones, widened as she tried to catch her breath and failed, tried to think *expulso* to knock the wight back –

And then blood erupted from the wight, coating her face. Hermione screwed her eyes up tight, freezing in horror. The blood was not hot – instead, it was already cooling and froze further as the cold air sucked the remaining warmth.

"Oh, euuugghh," moaned Hermione through unmoving lips. She finally opened her eyes and wished she hadn't, her stomach rebelling at the sight of the soldier's mangled face above her. There was only one eye, no longer bright blue, and the nose and upper part of the mouth were missing. In their place was the very pointed and sharp end of a spear.

The spear was pulled back with a sickening *squish*. Skin flapped and Hermione could see bone from the soldier and as the spear was removed entirely from the head, the body collapsed on her.

Hermione shrieked and a hysterical "*Repulso!*" sent the corpse flying through the air, landing several feet away with a *squish* and then, solid *thump*. Immediately Hermione began wiping the blood from her face, spitting as she rolled onto her knees.

A nasty feminine laugh made Hermione freeze, glancing up at the woman who saved her. She was tall, with broad shoulders and close-cropped brown hair that had tight little curls escaping it, making the woman's hair nearly as riotous as Hermione's. She had dark, glittering eyes and a strong body outline by the form-fitting sleeveless, yellow tunic she wore. The yellow seemed familiar, but other than its colour, her trousers were a light taupe and tucked into thick brown lace-up boots. The spear she carried was taller than she was, and blood dribbled down its shaft, mingling with other dark stains.

_This woman has been killing wights just as long as I have_, thought Hermione idly. Then Hermione remembered she was a witch, not a Muggle, and she didn't need to wipe the blood off by hand.

"*Tergeo,*" she muttered, siphoning the blood off and flicking it away.

"Neat trick," the woman commented, holding on a callused hand for Hermione to take to haul her up.

Hermione took it. "It comes in handy." She peered up at the woman, in awe of how tall she was. _She's almost Brienne's height!_

"Thank you, by the way," added Hermione, with a wobbly smile.

"You don't watch your back when you're confident," the woman pointed out, and although the tone was dry, the words held censure.
Hermione frowned. "I'm used to working with two others."

"I can tell." She bared her teeth in a parody of a kind smile. "You should practice more. Practice fighting with someone watching your back."

"I used to have someone I did that with." Hermione's frown deepened, but this time in sorrow. She thought back of her closest friend in Westeros; she thought of his smile, his brown eyes and his laugh, and how he was always there for her. "He's dead now. He was killed at the Twins."

"... I'm sorry," the other woman murmured.

They both stood still for a moment, and then, without taking her eyes off Hermione, the woman shifted, her spear twirled in her arms, and then the point was buried in a wight that was directly behind her, sagging its weight forward. The woman had punctured the corpse through the head.

"You're very good at that!" praised Hermione, eyes wide with awe. "And you're going for the headshots—"

"I've been watching," the woman bit back, yanking the spear from the body.

Hermione snapped her mouth shut.

"You should get back to the others," she finally said, jerking her square chin in the direction Hermione had previously been walking.

Hermione turned. Brienne and Jaime were viciously slashing through the last of the wights, and Arya was darting between them. At some point, she had picked up a broken piece of wood, one that was burning and was brandishing it at wights, herding them to Jaime and Brienne.

"Right! Right," muttered Hermione. She blinked. "Hey, what's your name? You never said."

"You're right – I didn't." There was something dark and humorous in the woman's eyes like she was laughing at Hermione and Hermione was the butt of the joke.

"Well, excuse me," muttered Hermione under her breath, turning her back on the woman and making her way to the others.

There were barely a handful of wights left, and Hermione concentrated enough to allow for her bursts of inflamarae as rapid-fire jets, lighting them on fire. They screeched but were soon ash, blowing away and scattering as Hermione's boots stepped through what remained.

When the last body sizzled into a crisp from Hermione's wand, silence fell on the five. The scent of burning flesh lingered in the air, as did the sound of crackling fires. Yet, there was a wind blowing, clearing the smoke from the great hall and the numerous corpses that lined the inner courtyard.

The sky above them was clear, with stars, distant yellow dots. A tint of purple was lining the horizon of the eastern sky, signalling the coming dawn. They had been burning bodies and fighting through the night.

They stood together, breathing heavily as they overcame their surprise at surviving. Hermione found herself breathlessly laughing, enough so that Arya joined in and they shared a quick hug. Even Brienne had a small smile on her face, but Jaime levelled a suspicious look on the woman that followed behind Hermione. "Who're you?"

The woman smiled back at him but said nothing.
"She saved my life," admitted Hermione, a tinge of pink on her cheeks. "I got distracted."

The woman snorted. "She forgot that things can come up from behind."

Arya groaned. "Hermione! Really?"

Hermione's blushed deepened. "It happens." She cleared her throat. "Anyway, my hero here speared the wight through the head. I think she's been cutting down the numbers, too."

"So, is that the last of them?" Arya's voice was loud in the quiet. "There's no more need to burn anything?"

"Yes," replied Hermione, looking around the courtyard. Whatever white snow there had been previously was now blackened into a dark grey with the ash of the bodies Hermione burned. There were some mangled limbs strewn around, mostly legs or decapitated heads that she did not get to, but there were no more glowing blue eyes in the pre-dawn.

"Then what's that?"

The others turned to see what Arya was pointing at; a red glow lit up the elevator shaft to the top of the wall, two buildings, and one covered walkway over from their courtyard. Hermione started in surprise. *I thought we finished with burning the bodies.*

She exchanged a glance with Brienne and the other woman who had yet to introduce herself, but Jaime kept his eyes focused on the flickering light. A dark plume of smoke rose into the air and some ashes were beginning to fall around them, carried by the wind.

"That's the courtyard by the Black Gate," he said instead, lines etching his face. He looked grim. "We should investigate."

They had to climb up a set of outer stairs to the second floor-covered walkway, trudging single file as they followed Jaime, who was moving quickly. Arya kept pace with the disgraced Kingsguard, while Hermione followed her with the girl in the light yellow tunic and trousers, and Brienne took the rear. At the top of the walkway, Jaime stopped.

"Do you hear that?" he asked, cocking his head to the side.

Hermione strained her ears and heard a shrill, feminine scream, followed by muffled words. Then, a hoarse yell, full of anguish and anger. Somewhere nearby, Grey Wind howled.

"Robb!" cried Hermione, pushing past Jaime and taking point from their group, rushing down the wooden walkway so that he steps slapped on the board. She skidded at the end, turning right and bouncing off the stonewall as she entered the building hewn into the rocks that made the wall and then flung open a door at the end of the short hall to reveal another set of stairs, this time leading down.

She thundered down those, and came upon the outer courtyard, near the dungeons and opposite the Black Gate itself, guarded by Seaworth and Tarbor.

Without a door, Hermione was able to burst onto the courtyard gasped as her eyes took in the scene in front of her. She vaguely realized the others standing still behind her as they caught up.

The Greatjon was sprawled over Grey Wind's neck, with a nervous Karstark and Bolton restraining the giant direwolf while a few other members of the Brotherhood without Banners attempted a pileup on the wolf to keep it from moving. Froth and spit dribbled from Grey Wind's mouth, and his sharp
teeth gleamed in the early morning light as he kept tossing his head, snapping at the men around him. Robb was being held back by no less than four of his guard: his uncle and the Blackfish both had arms wrapped around his chest, pulling him back. Edd was grasping Robb's right shoulder and arm, hauling him back as Patrek Mallister did the same on the left. The Smalljon was helping the Blackfish, and all their faces were red and teeth barred as Robb attempted to move forward with superhuman strength, toward the burning barn. He was letting out a sound that was like a wounded animal, fighting against its enemies to the very last, veins in his neck sticking out as the sound crawled up from deep in his chest.

"Robb," gasped Hermione, feeling her heart clench in sympathetic pain. She took a few steps toward him until a familiar feminine voice let out a series of insults, all spat at another woman in the courtyard.

"You fucking cunt, you stupid bitch, what did you do, how could you do that? How could you let them do that? I'll kill you! I'll kill you, you ginger cunt, you rotten-smelling cunt of a demon"

Ygritte's arms were outstretched, the hands ending in claws as she tried to crawl her way out of Grenn and Lord Braken's arms. Both were straining against her, digging their feet in as Ygritte kicked and bit, spittle flying from her mouth as she continued to shout angrily.

"They burned them," the other woman with them said from behind her, her voice small and shocked. Hermione turned to see what she meant, and her mouth fell open. "By the Seven, she burned them alive."

The Black Gate courtyard was a large space; Davos Seaworth and Tarbor stood by the gate mechanism with Maege and Lyra Mormont, shock on their faces. Clegane had dragged Sansa as far away from the flames as possible, his own eyes wide and fixated on them as they stood near the gate and Davos and Tarbor. He kept her tiny body pressed against the wall, despite the thin young woman trying to reach around him. Tears were slipping down her face, his hair in disarray and her dress ripped in parts — all which told Hermione that at some point they came across wights but survived.

To their left were the barn stables, where incoming visitors or returning Black Brothers kept their horses. However, the barn was completely engulfed in flames that roared and crackled as flames popped and spit into the air. That was what Arya had seen and pointed out when they were a few buildings over.

Directly opposite the barn on the right side of the courtyard was a large bonfire of dead. However, something else drew Hermione's eyes next to the bonfire in between it and the barn. Several burning posts stuck to the ground with Baratheon soldiers milling about them, with dazed looks in their eyes.

The bodies hanging off the posts were nothing more than charred crisps, each manacled to chains that hung down from rings near the top. Melisandre was standing between each of the fires - the execution posts and the bonfire - her arms outstretched so that one hand was reaching toward each fire, her head tipped back in ecstasy.

There were a few others slumped on their knees, their hands behind their backs in their shackles. They wore shaggy fur coats, or just thin shirts, shivering in the cold even as the heat from the burning barn or posts warmed their fronts.

They're the Wildlings, thought Hermione, blinking in shock. Then she realized what the other young woman had meant when she said they were burned — Melisandre had found the time to gather the prisoners from the attack on Castle Black and was sacrificing them, burning them along the bodies of
Jaime Lannister made a noise behind her, something strangled as he took in the sight and smell of burning flesh.

Hermione's eyes landed on several members of the Night's Watch, clustered together and staring at the barn in dismay, or others who were warily watching the Red Priestess as she organized the few remaining Baratheon soldiers toward the prisoners.

"Why aren't they stopping her?" cried Hermione, and then she tapped into her magic, accidentally Apparating and appearing in front of Melisandre, her wand digging into the fleshy underside of the woman's chin.

The Priestess lowered her arms, slowly. She peered down at Hermione, as much as she could from the extremely tipped back position her head was in.

"Winter Witch," she said, although there was wariness in her voice. "Have you come to witness the sacrifices for the Lord of Light?"

"Why are you doing this?" hissed Hermione, pushing her wand further into Melisandre's chin.

"It's for the Watch!" interrupted one of the Black Brothers, causing Hermione to turn, although she kept her wand on the other woman. It was a weedy man that she had seen before, spending time with Thorne. Although that man was standing to the side, watching the burning burn warily with his arms crossed and a sour expression on his face.

"What?" asked Hermione, her tone frosty. "What do you mean by that?"

"We was thinkin' it," the man replied mulishly, "That the Commander — well, he let in Wildlings, didn't he? That's not what the Watch does."

Robb howled something behind them, the words lost.

"The — the Lord Commander?" Hermione's brain stuttered to a pause.

*What does Jon have to do with this?* She wondered, her eyes trailing from the Black brother in confusion to the others standing and facing the burning barn, to Melisandre. In her confusion, the wand lowered a bit and the woman's red eyes were sympathetic as she peered at the younger, and shorter, woman.

Things clicked into place. *No, "NO!!"*

Hermione spun around and stared in horror at the barn — just as the man kept speaking behind her, as though she had to understand. There was something desperate in his voice as he spoke, too.

"Jon Snow was goin' to destroy the Night's Watch," the man babbled. "He was goin' to lead the Wildlings through our gates as no Lord Commander has ever done before!"

"And—And the others here? The Wildlings?" whispered Hermione. "Why are they being burned?"

The man shrugged. "Better kill 'em now; and if that other witch wants 'em for her spells or rituals, fine by me."

An incredibly indignant part of Hermione bristled at the Wildlings being killed liked her ancestors — witches and wizards burned at the stake for being who they were — and another part of Hermione
burned hot in rage at the sheer indifference and ingrained hatred the man had for the Wildlings. Earlier, they had managed to come up with an agreed deal for everyone — and this man, and others had jeopardized that.

"Who else?" she asked, her voice low.

"What?"

"Who else was involved in this? To — to —" Hermione couldn't finish the sentence, couldn't think what it meant for Robb's half-sibling to be burned alive. Hermione might have been able to cast a flame-freeze charm on herself and walk into the burning barn, but if it had been going for some time now, it was likely that Jon was long dead. She couldn't help him — but she could help avenge him for Robb and the North.

The Black Brother looked warily at her, but Hermione flicked her wand and cast a *confundus* and a mild compulsion, making him more susceptible to answer her questions rather than casting the alluring *imperio*. She would avoid any Unforgivables, especially when near the Wall with how her magic was reacting.

The man sang. "Bowen Marsh and Othell Yarwyck. And that kid — Olly. Some others."

There were notable exclusions, some even surprising. No Alliser Thorne, no Grenn or Sam or Edd Tollett.

"Thank you."

"What d'you mean—"

Then Hermione jabbed her wand at him, nonverbally weaving together her transfiguration until the member of the Night's Watch shrunk and twisted, his features popping and melting in other places until only his clothes remained. A startled squeak emerged from within the folds.

Melisandre, still at Hermione's side but a few paces away now that she had moved to the man, took a few steps forward. She knelt, shifting the black cloth away until she revealed a shivering rat.

"Impressive," the Red Priestess said, and she sounded impressed, as well. "Your magic is versatile."

"I don't like traitors," spat Hermione, glaring down at the man-turned-rat. "And I dislike rats even more."

The sound of a few other steps crunching in the snow had Hermione turn to face Alliser Thorne, who was staring down at the rat impassively. "When will the spell wear off?"

"Who says it will?" Hermione tilted her chin up in defiance, a challenging tone in her voice.

"Can you reverse it?" the sour man asked, his mouth turning down into a scowl. It was his default expression.

"If I want," replied Hermione, who paused and then added, "And I do not want to."

The sour look on Thorne's face deepened. "Now, listen here, Witch — the attack on Castle Black near damn-well destroyed us! We're down to less than twenty active men at this tower, and that's now nineteen thanks to you—"

"Eighteen."
He blinked.

"You're down to eighteen," pointed out Hermione quietly, her voice low and trembling with suppressed anger. "Unless you never count Jon as part of the Night's Watch."

"Jon Snow was my Lord Commander. I had no love for him — that was no secret. But I never once disobeyed an order," the man snapped at her, two splotches of red on his cheeks. "Loyalty is the foundation on which the Night's Watch is built and the Watch means everything to me!"

"Then why didn't you stop them?" she cried. Her voice carried across the courtyard, silent except for the crackle of the flame.

The accusation was as much for Thorne as it was the others. She didn't know when those men had convinced Jon to enter the barn, or how; and she didn't know how long Melisandre had been burning the men — it was clearly long enough that she managed to execute at least eight of the Wildlings.

"She was at it before we knew," replied Thorne back, hotly. "While the rest of us were dealing with those — those wights," and he looked pained, just admitting it, "And by the time we got here..."

Hermione turned back on the other woman. "How dare you?! How could you?! What gives you the right—!"

"R'hllor gives me the right," she replied firmly, her red eyes flashing and Hermione's curse wound on her arm flared up in response. She hitched a breath. "I can take these men and their sacrifices and strengthen the Lord of the Light for his fight with the Eternal Other—"

"You're a zealot," accused Hermione hotly, brandishing her wand at the other woman. "A zealot and a fraud. You claimed Stannis Baratheon was your champion, your Azor Ahai, and he's dead. Turned into a wight and then destroyed by my magic. Where does that leave you now?"

Melisandre pursed her lips, clearly perturbed. "I admit I was wrong about Lord Baratheon—"

Behind Hermione, Brienne exclaimed, "Wrong?! You admit that now? When I watched as a shadowy figure of Stannis murdered Renly in front of me? You helped to kill him, to become a kinslayer!"

The Red Priestess was beginning to look caged.

Hermione stalked away from her, toward the Wildlings. Some looked up warily as she approached, knowing she had magic as well, but Hermione just muttered *alohomora*, and watched in satisfaction as their shackles popped open. The largest of them all, a tall man with ginger hair and a nearly blond beard, stood up from his knees first, gingerly rubbing his wrists where the shackles dug in.

He nodded at Hermione and then turned to Melisandre and the few Baratheon soldiers that supported her. They were clustering together with their swords out.

"You fucking traitors!" one shouted, eyes wild. "You'll kill us all unless we provide to the Lord of the Light!"

It seemed that was the breaking point for Jaime Lannister, as he came up behind the soldier and kicked the back of his knee in, causing the man to stumble. Brienne and the other woman in yellow were quick with him, Brienne with her sword out and the woman with the bloody spear she continued to carry.

In the meantime, Hermione summoned the men's swords, not even bothering to move as the steel
flew through the air and sailed past her in a downward arc until they landed at the feet of the previously locked-up Wildlings. Grimly, four of them, including the large man, reached for the swords.

"The only traitors I see here are the ones who shoved their Lord Commander into a burning barn to die," spat the Kingslayer, "Because a woman told them it was going to save them!"

A scuffle to the side and the members of the Night's Watch seemed to rally themselves, except Grenn and Lord Bracken who continued to keep a hold on Ygritte, physically; the ones the man named were separated from those milling about.

"For thousands of years, the Night's Watch has held Castle Black against the Wildlings," one of the men said, staring at the large Wildling with his borrowed sword.

The Wildling looked down at the Black Brother in disgust. "Until now."

The man stared up at the Wildling in disgust — which faded as the life went out in his eyes from the sword impaled through his body.

Alliser Thorne made a noise of complaint, muttering, "Seventeen," under his breath.

"You're going to be down a lot more than that," commented Hermione darkly, glancing at him. He sighed, noisily and heavily, as the Wildlings killed the others involved in Jon's murder, and the Baratheon soldiers who were complicit in Melisandre's orders.

"We can't defend the Wall like this," he muttered to her, crossing his arms.

"The plan was to renovate the other castles and put the Wildlings there," reminded Hermione, her eyes glancing over at Robb, who, having worn himself out, had fallen to his knees. Her heart ached to go to him, but she had to finish this first. "I'm sure we can have some Northerners stay in shifts here at Castle Black, too. We..." she trailed off and sighed. "We know what we're fighting now."

Thorne grunted in agreement, then jerked his chin at Melisandre, who was standing in the courtyard serenely, her hands clasped in front of her as she watched the men around her die. "What do we do about the fire-burning harpy?"

Hermione's shoulders dropped. "Keep an eye on her for now. I'll—I'll come up with something soon. But first..." her eyes drifted to Robb. "I need to be—"

She left Thorne standing alone, walking over to Robb and sinking to her knees next to him. It was a reversal of how he had approached her at the top of the Wall, and now she was the one comforting him as he put her arms around him. Robb tipped his head into her shoulder, eyes fixated on the burning barn.

The dawning sun began to crest over the tallest of the buildings at Castle Black, elongating shadows and stretching them as those who remained in the courtyard kept silent, only a few left to start a meager breakfast or for Robb's council to update the others who remained outside by Moletown of Jon's death and the diminished Night's Watch. Even the Wildlings kept respectfully quiet, the giant man comforting Ygritte once Grenn and Bracken let her go.

Arya slinked toward Robb and Hermione, and when Robb spotted her, her red-rimmed eyes and snotty nose, he made a strangled noise and pulled his youngest sister to his chest. Arya hiccupped on a sob, her tiny hands clutching at her brother, burrowing into him.

There was the pattering of feet on snow, and then Sansa threw herself at Robb and Arya, heaving
sobs as Robb gathered his other sister close and kissed the top of her hair.

The burning barn was no longer engulfed in flame, the building creaking and collapsing in on itself with an ominous crash. Hermione winced as fresh flames greedily licked at the wood and hay.

"Is there anything you can do?" a strangled voice asked from her shoulder.

Hermione glanced down. Robb's blue eyes were dull, and Arya's grey peered up at her from underneath the young King's arms. Sansa's own matching blue eyes implored Hermione to do something.

Her heart beat hard and she wasn't immune to the Starks and their pleas.

"I might," said Hermione quietly. "I'll try, anyway."

"Thank you," muttered Robb.

Hermione pulled herself away from Robb's side, moving to a clear space in front of the barn. She rolled her shoulders back and stuck her wand out in front of her, closing her eyes as she thought of the spell she needed: the fire-extinguishing spell that Charlie Weasley used at the TriWizard tournament; a wind spell to clear the smoke; and then levitation charms to move the largest of the structure to the side.

"Restinguere! Fumus Finis! Wingardium Leviosa!" Hermione had to repeat that spell a few times, as beams shifted. Her next spell sent gushes of water erupting from her wand, dousing any still-hot beams or sparking parts of the barn in cold water. "Aqua Eructo!"

White steam burst from the wood and larger portions of the barn that was still intact when the water hit it. The steam soon obscured the burning structure, but Hermione felt confident that it was no longer a danger.

She lowered her wand and sighed.

Something in the barn creaked. With a furrow, Hermione raised her wand, casting the smoke-removing spell again. "Fumus Finis."

The white billow of steam thinned, wisping away as Hermione stepped forward, moving her hand back and forth in front of her. Someone in the steam coughed.

She blinked. "Hello?"

Another cough and something was moving through the steam toward her. The figure was shadowed, hunched over as they coughed.

Hermione squinted, narrowing her eyes, and peering into the steam at the figure, her wand ready in case it was a wight that escaped their purge that previous evening —

But a man stumbled out of the barn, through the steam. His clothes were burnt off entirely, revealing milky white skin and large areas covered in thick, dark soot. Somehow, his black hair managed to survive. Long smudges of grey, where he wiped his hands over his body, were long lines down his sides and chest.

Hermione's eyes widened and she stumbled back in the snow, closer to Robb, Sansa, and Arya. Behind her, she heard them scrambling to their feet and Arya shout, "JON?!"
Sansa screamed.

Jon Snow, Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, stumbled forward a few more steps. Jon's grey eyes were wide, a wild look to them, as they were staring at his hands in fascination.

Following his path, Hermione’s own eyes travelled down the sooty chest to the Lord Commander's hands — and then her breath hitched.

Flames licked up and down his arms, gathering around his wrists and then sparking off in tiny white clusters until, slowly, they disappeared entirely. But not before everyone had seen.

Somewhere, Jaime Lannister began laughing hysterically. Through wheezes, he managed to stutter, "F-Fire — can- cannot — h-harm — a — d-dragon."

"Fucking hell," muttered Thorne. "He's a fucking Targaryen!"

In the stillness of the shocked courtyard, no one moved, or spoke beyond those two; then Robb was at Jon's side, arms wrapped around him and helping the other man keep upright as they moved quickly away from the barn.

"Jon!" Robb cried, clutching at him tightly, Grey Wind dashing forward to hop and jump around the two men in excitement.

Jon's hand shook as he reached for the other man. When his hand settled on his shoulder, Jon's hand clenched and he quickly drew Robb to him, ignoring his own state of nakedness. Tears washed some of the soot away from his face, mingling and making the ash run into grey streaks.

"I don't care," Robb was muttering into Jon's hair. "I don't care — I don't —"

Arya slammed her body hard into the two, making them stumble until Robb regained their equilibrium. Hermione swished her wand, conjured a robe for Jon, letting it hover awkwardly around him until Robb noticed, and drew it around his brother.

Sansa stood apart, her hands at her mouth and tears in her eyes as she walked to her siblings, in slow, tentative steps.

"Sansa," coughed Jon, eyes catching on her, and holding out a hand invitingly.

With a sob, the red-haired woman crossed the last meter or so separating her from her family and crashed into Jon, all the while breathlessly whispering apologies.

"But what does this mean?" asked Hermione, glancing around at those who were staring open-mouthed at the Lord Commander, some with fear in their eyes.

"Looks like those old rumours about Rhaegar stealing and raping Lyanna might be more than just stories," commented Jaime with an infuriating smirk on his face. "Because it looks like the Prince had one more child that Robert didn't kill." His face twitched briefly into sorrow.

"And Ned must've known," commented the Greatjon in shock, looking around at the other Northern Lords who were equally confused. "To have hidden Snow with him—"

"But," repeated Hermione, frustrating growing, "what does that mean?"

"He's the last Targaryen," the woman with the spear who joined them said quietly, making eyes swing toward her. "The rightful heir to the Seven Kingdoms. King of Westeros."
Jon made a strange noise.

"He is born amidst salt and smoke," cried Melisandre, breaking into the conversation from where she stood, under a guard of no less than four Wildlings. "He is Azor Ahai! The Prince Who Was Promised!"

She sank to her knees.

A stunned Alliser Thorne followed her, staring at Jon incomprehensibly, as everything he knew about the world was suddenly proved wrong and he was adrift, unsure of where he stood. By the Black Gate, Davos Seaworth and the Baratheon soldier, Tarbor, followed suit.

"No," Jon muttered, "No, no — don't—"

Grenn and Sam, looking unsure, shared a glance but then also sank to their knees.

Jon turned his head to stare at Robb, who drew away from him. "Robb, please, no — not you —"

Robb shook his head.

"You will always be my brother," he said instead, his voice low, full of promise. "Whether you're... you're the King of Westeros, or Lord Commander, or this Azor Ahai... you're my brother."

"And mine!" chirped up Arya, staring at Jon.

Sansa nodded. "And mine." She reached out and tentatively touched his shoulder. "My brother."

"But you're the King in the North," protested Jon, "I won't take that—"

"You don't have to," replied Robb, just as quickly. "Not now anyway."

Jon stared at Robb for a long moment, his face unreadable, but then he nodded and agreed, "Not now."

The King in the North turned partially to look at the courtyard, the confused and torn faces of his Northern and Riverlands men, the scorn on the Wildlings who would never kneel anyway, and those in supplication. Jon followed him, and at each of their sides, Arya and Sansa framed the two — one a King, and the other, a potential one.

"We survived last night," began Robb, his voice carrying, "Barely, but we did."

"Our true enemies are revealed," continued Jon in his Lord Commander voice. "The dead rise against us. They are our true enemy!"

"We fought a war in the South," added Robb, looking at his council and guards. "We managed a defeat, if not an uneasy peace knowing that we might have to face Tywin Lannister again. And we will — one day. But that is not the war we must now fight."

Jon straightened his shoulders and tried to look as dignified as he could in a conjured robe that left his feet bare in the snow. "I know there were those who did not like the idea of the Wildlings being let into the North, to the other castles in need of repair. But we need people now, to work together, to beat back the dead."

"My father had a saying," Sansa piped up, causing both Robb and Jon to turn to her in surprise and Arya's mouth to drop open. "The lone wolf dies but the pack survives!"
"We are a pack!" shouted Robb. "We are not alone!"

"We are one!" added Jon, his voice carrying through the courtyard. "You either fight for the living, or you are the enemy of the living." His hard stare met each face staring back at him. "Which are you?"

"Are you pack? Or enemy of the pact?" added Arya, her face cut as hard as granite as the four Starks stared at those in the courtyard.

Grey Wind threw his head back and howled, and Patrek Mallister added to it with a devil-may-care grin on his face. The other guards took up the cry. Then the Greatjon was thrusting his sword in the air, Grengn and Sam were back on their feet, their voices added to the clamour as more and more — Northmen, Riverlanders, the Black Brothers, Seaworth, Tarbor, Clegane, even Jaime Lannister and Brienne and the woman with the spear — all raised their weapons or their voices, joining in until the words came together.

"PACK! PACK! PACK!"

A smile stretched across Hermione's face as she caught Robb's eyes. She revelled in the triumph in them, in the gleam, the anticipation of what was to come as he stood with four members of his family, only missing the last two.

When the cries began to die down, Hermione meandered close enough to the siblings (and perhaps, she thought, one cousin), until Robb reached forward and caught her hand in his, drawing her to his side.

"Do you still have that map?" he asked her, with Arya, Sansa, and Jon turning to her expectantly.

Hermione nodded.

"Good." The smile Robb gave her was not necessarily kind, but rather determined. "We wasted too much already. It's time to get our family back together." He looked around at them all. "We're missing Bran and Rickon and no more. We are a pack. We will face whatever comes, together."

Far beyond the wall in the northernmost reaches of the Land of Always Winter, out of their immediate sight, the morning rays failed to pierce the dark horizon. There, growing in strength was a violent blizzard of ice and snow, slowly making its way south. An icy wind preceded it, sweeping across the land and hitting the wall with the force of a gale, making the giant structure groan.

As one, the four Starks and Hermione turned to face the Wall. The giant structure was imposing and foreboding from the angle they were at, but it was all that stood between them and the immediate threat of the wights and their masters.

"Together," murmured Hermione, squeezing Robb's hand.

He glanced at her, and they smiled.

"Together," he added, and the words were a promise.

END OF PART TWO

The Winter Witch will return for PART THREE... in October 2019
End Notes

Taking prompts on missing scenes, behind-the-scenes, what other characters were up to, for *If Winter Comes...*

You can find me on Tumblr, as writing-as-tracey, although it is a multifandom blog, so expect to see anything ranging from Riverdale, to Star Wars, to Teen Wolf and more. I haven't been on as much as I'd like recently, but I do participate.

Now translated into Russian!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!